

Blue Sprinkles by mikeyandellie

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Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Other(s), Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

El couldn't remember why Blue was her favorite color. Maybe it was because it was the color of the bracelet her father had given her. Maybe it was because it was the color of Cinderella's dress. Or, maybe, it had to do with the color of the sugar cookie sprinkles that lined Mike Wheeler's lips after she kissed him.

1. (Un)Welcome Home

As El Hopper drank her lemonade, basking in the warm summer sun, she couldn't help but notice the familiar car that drove up her road. It wasn't that she didn't like the boy driving it, it was just that she always imagined a different future with him.

She carefully stood up from the porch steps, feigning that her glass was empty and she simply wanted a refill. Her motions were quick and delicate, the two words he most likely would have used to describe her. He was always so articulate like that. Luckily, her stealth paid off as she was back in the safe confines of her home before his car was even in park.

"I thought you said you were trying to tan, kid?" rang her dad from down the hall in the kitchen, having heard the slam of the door.

She strolled into the kitchen, opening the fridge, and grabbing the freshly made pitcher of lemonade. El's chief-of-police father let out an audible "ah" as he noticed why she was inside. She was going to avoid telling him the real reason, but he beat her to the punch.

"Has Wheeler come back for the summer yet?" he asked El as she sat at the stool adjacent to his at the countertop. The question leaves El sputtering and coughing up the lemonade she just swallowed.

El knew he didn't have any malintentions bringing up Mike, or "Wheeler" as Jim had been calling him all these years. She just wished that he hadn't thrown the question so casually at her. Besides her most-trusted confidant, Max, and her dad, no one knew the full extent to which Michael Wheeler had ruined El's future prospects of crushes and relationships. Developing a crush on him at the ripe age of 6 to only have those feelings boil into something even more during self-conscious middle school and hormonal high school years had done a number on El. She didn't think she could care about or even love someone else the way she did for Michael Wheeler.

Finally through with her coughing fit, El shrugged and offered a casual, "Nope, haven't seen him yet." Sure, she lied, but it was better than having to explain how she narrowly missed a conversation with

him mere seconds ago.

Her dad was about to say something else, when the familiar chime of her ringtone went off in her pocket. After realizing that the call was from her boyfriend, Carter, she excused herself.

“Hey!” she smiled even though she knew he couldn’t see her. She walked up the wooden staircase, her feet on autopilot as they took her to the last room at the end of the hall.

“Hi Ellie,” came his familiar, sweet voice from the other end of the phone. “We’re still on for dinner tonight, right?”

El stepped into her bedroom, feeling calmer from the potential incident from earlier as she smelt the vanilla air freshener she always kept plugged in. Anyone that came in here, and knew El well, always said that walking in here was like walking into El’s mind. The walls were painted baby blue and in the center, sat her bed covered in a blue flower peppered duvet. Instead of traditional canisters, all her pens and makeup brushes, and other little things were kept in brightly colored ornate mugs. Most of the space on her bookshelf was filled with cookbooks and baking recipes. Her binders filled with drafts of her own creations were kept on a blue filing cabinet above her dresser that held more oddly designed aprons from Max, of course, than regular clothing. Her walls were covered with candids of friends and family, photos of her favorite masterpieces, and newspaper clippings all ranting about her successful business despite her little experience as an entrepreneur.

Growing up, El had been bored in school. She didn’t like English or History, and don’t even get her started on Math. Science had been mundane until Chemistry, but even then, she didn’t feel motivation to study or be enthusiastic in what she was learning about. The prospect of college had been daunting given the fact that El knew from a young age that she wouldn’t want a traditional job, nor did she have any desire to spend 4 more years learning.

Throughout her turmoils in the public education system, there had really only been one thing keeping her together: baking. It started off when she was little and her now late mother would hold El on her hip and let her lick the spoon. From those afternoons rolling cookie

dough with her mother to learning how to use the oven by herself to even being asked continuously by friends and family to bring one of her desserts to their parties, El had found her true passion in life. There was something about making something from scratch, no matter the small amount of Math it required, and watching it become a beautiful creation that lit up someone's day and filled their stomach that has given El a euphoric feeling since that very first batch of chocolate chip cookies.

So, after passing over college applications, El opted to just take classes at the local culinary school whenever she wanted to learn a new aspect of her craft or sharpen her skills. However, her dad didn't just let her off the hook that easily. He knew she was happy, but he also wanted her to make a life for herself from hard work. Fresh out of high school, El churned out a baking business. Hawkins didn't have any sort of bakery apart from the generic supermarket corner until El unveiled her company entitled "Blue Sprinkles." Her days at home were filled with preparing and baking and delivering her cupcakes and cookies and brownies and all her other goodies from birthday parties to elegant dinner events. She even baked a wedding cake a few months ago. As her business grew steadily, more and more people from more and more towns began placing orders and El was getting recognition county-wide. Some critics projected that her tiny business could even be recognized nationwide if she kept up her love of baking. This upcoming June would be not only the one year anniversary of her high school graduation, but the anniversary of the start of Blue Sprinkles. She almost had enough money saved for a storefront, too.

El laid down on her bed, staring up at the stick-on stars that had been on her ceiling since she was an infant. "Yep, you're coming in twenty?"

Carter Wilkins had been a boy El had met at one of her sparsely-attended cooking classes the previous fall. His mother had complained that if he was going to survive at college, nutritional wise, he needed to learn how to prepare proper meals. El still thinks Carter would have burned down their building after severely blackening the chicken in his pan. After telling him she could cook him a way better meal, at the privacy of her own home, their

relationship began. He had travelled from New York to the University of Indiana, only a half hour drive from Hawkins. Combining the short distance with his decently attractive looks, El landed herself a boyfriend within two weeks.

El confidently told her father and Max that she loved Carter. In fact, she said she could even picture a future with him. However, as Max so dubiously pointed out whenever the conversation came up, her planned future was so...cookie-cutter, jab intended. El figured she would keep her business running while Carter studied child education at college. He would propose after he graduated and they would move into a house in Hawkins. He would get a job at the high school and she would expand her business. After a few years of marriage, they would have one or two kids and spend the rest of their days raising their family and pursuing their passions. Max always asked, "Okay, but what else?" But, El was always at a loss for words. She couldn't give any special hopes or dreams for her relationship with Carter. She had settled for what she deemed to be a normal life, figuring he would be the best it would ever get for her.

Their conversation ended quickly, the details of their date mapped out to the last minute. It was the last night Carter would be in Indiana before travelling back to New York for the summer. El had promised to visit, but her trips were all dependent on how the business was going.

El was just plugging her phone into her charger when a large *THUMP!* sounded in the distance, causing her to jump. She looked at her open window, the blue curtains billowing in the light summer breeze. Her heart clenched when she heard another drop come from just past the small green patch separating her house to the next. Maybe she could close the window and he wouldn't notice her.

El crept off her bed, keeping herself obscured from the window's expansive view. She could hear shuffling, he was never very fluid with his motions. Her hands reached for the edge of the window, ready to close it, but curiosity got the best of her.

El braced herself as she peered just past the frame, looking into the familiar bedroom next door. The last time she saw it lit up was when he was home on his spring break, a two week time frame that she

somehow managed to hide herself away from him. Everything was the same except for the boy inside. The same bed in the corner with the checker-print duvet. The same desk facing the window, covered with notes and books bigger than El had ever seen. The same clear cabinets filled with tools and gears and other things she had never quite understood. The same walls covered in posters of Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell and Nikola Tesla and Henry Ford. It was all the same on the exterior.

The boy, however, had changed as the years passed. 12 years ago, he was a tiny boy, a few inches taller than El nonetheless, with a crop of devilishly curly black hair, spots of freckles just beginning to adorn his face, and gaps in his teeth. 5 years ago, he was still taller and his hair still crazy, but his freckles were more dense and his body disproportionate. And, as of 2 seconds ago, El notices he is lanky, but with more defined muscles. He is taller than ever, definitely at least half a foot taller than her, probably more. His freckles are more spaced, but generously speckle his cheekbones and nose. His hair is wild and curly, unable to be tamed.

The only two things that have remained the same about the boy are his dark eyes, wide with curiosity, and his smile, dimples hitting the corners of his eyes when he is really happy. El hates herself when the word “pretty” floats around in her head upon seeing him again. Sure, it wouldn’t be the first time she thought about him with that word, but things were different now. She had her blue-eyed Carter filling her with happiness these days.

Nonetheless, El could feel hordes of memories flooding through her mind as she watched Michael Wheeler unpack his clothes from college. Just as she was about to divulge in the swirling images of young Mike in her head, he abruptly turned, reaching for his desk.

It was in this moment that El realized she was fucked. Not only because his eyes landed directly in line with hers and she stumbled from behind the window in surprise, but also, because its as if the Mike-sized bit of her heart awakens again and it begins pounding furiously.

El may have liked Michael Wheeler at ages 6 and 12 and 17, but at age 19, she loves Carter Wilkins, which means much more, even if

she is lying to herself that she never loved Mike.

“El,” he smiles easily, the way her name rolls off his tongue sending a shiver down her spine.

Jesus, keep it together, Eleven!

Still dumbfounded that she had to face what she so desperately was trying to avoid, she offered an awkward wave back to his introduction.

“How have you been? I don’t think I’ve properly seen you since Christmas,” he effortlessly responds, as if he doesn’t notice how his presence impacts her.

El coughs, wanting to at least sound normal. “I’m great. I’ve been pretty busy with the business.”

“Oh, of course! I am really glad that’s going well. I always smile when my mom says Blue Sprinkles catered something for her,” he chuckles, his hand sweeping through his curly black hair.

El blushed, trying not to imagine Mike talking about her with his mother. Had this been two years ago, she would have gone out of her mind trying to figure out what those conversations were about. Now, she’s trying to forget what he just said.

“How’s Massachusetts? Engineering treating you well?” she asks casually, showing she remembered his MIT attendance as well as his career path of mechanical engineering.

“It’s awesome! Better than I could have ever imagined, actually. There are so many cool people. The classes can be tricky, but hey, engineering is hard,” he shrugs, his smile reaching his eyes. El tries to ignore how that familiar, and once sought after, smile goes straight to her heartstrings.

“Good for you. I don’t know anyone else that could bear with that major,” she finally smiles a little, the corners of her lips lifting only slightly. Luckily, this conversation was less awkward than she always pictured it out to be.

Mike blushes at her remark, trying not to show how much that meant to him. He opens his mouth to respond before the sound of a car door slamming makes them both jump. El peers to the street and smiles fully when she sees Carter making his way to her porch.

“Well, I have to go. I’ll see you around this summer,” she says as a statement rather than a question. Quite frankly, she hopes this is the last time she will see Michael Wheeler in his three months off.

Before Mike can respond, El shuts the window and closes the curtains, running to her dresser to throw on a fresh outfit. As she changes quickly, her mind registers the slight look of defeat on Mike’s face upon her saying goodbye. If he keeps up with her social media accounts, he would know that it was her boyfriend of eight months coming for her. El, still quite bitter through the year, had eyed Mike’s profiles whenever it was three in the morning and she couldn’t sleep. He had dated a girl, McKenzie, for a few months until their pictures came down at the beginning of the month. El would never admit this to anyone, but she hoped he was hurt from the breakup.

After fixing her outfit, El ran downstairs, greeted by Carter making small talk with her father. Jim thought his only daughter’s boyfriend was kind and sweet, a combination she had deserved after what she had been through. The pair left, talking and smiling, ignoring the fact that this would be their last night together for awhile.

As El got into the car, listening to some story Carter had about his last day of classes, her eyes turned up to see two long legs swinging absentmindedly from the window across from her room. She could see Mike scribbling away at a leather notebook and she pulled her eyes away and back to her boyfriend.

While giving Carter an impromptu kiss, El forced herself to forget that Michael Wheeler was home for the summer.

2. Memories & Cupcakes

Notes for the Chapter:

warning: you guys might HATE michael

“Does he still look like a sex god?” Max cackled, head resting on the headboard of her bed. The response is met with a pillow chucked at her head courtesy of El.

“I called him that *one* time years ago! Let it go!” El groaned, burying her face in her hands from embarrassment at her pubescent self. She had a feeling she would never live down half of the stuff she had said about her childhood crush over the years.

With a smirk adorning her face and a glint in her eye, Max replied, “You didn’t answer the question.”

“Don’t you dare try and sass me now, *Maxine*,” El retorted, knowing this was the easiest way to anger her best friend.

At this, Max raised her hands in defense and let silence pool through the air. Neither of them had to speak to know what the other was thinking.

El and Mike’s history with each other was extensive and twisted and heart-warming, yet heartbreakingly lived in the darkest corner of El’s mind. She never rehashed these memories in broad daylight or willingly. The overthinking only ever happened during dark, early morning hours or under the influence of a few too many sips of champagne during the holidays. Michael Wheeler lived in her mental shadows, his presence in real life always managing to shake El to the core.

Often times, El wished she could relive her four years of middle school. Living next door to Mike meant that they toughed it out together at school from a young age and branched out to bring together quite possibly the most interesting clique. Were they nerdy and teased? Sure, but they were happy. Max moving from California had simply completed it. Max had joined her side at sixth grade,

easily blending in with what once had been her friend group.

El and Mike met Will Byers in Kindergarten. From there, the trio reached out to Lucas Sinclair. In fourth grade, Dustin Henderson became part of the circle. And finally, Max joined, the final piece to their party. The few years they had together in middle school before the chaos came was the best part of El's life. They all had sleepovers together and stayed up until the early morning hours to watch movies and talk. They would go sledding down their streets in the winter and swimming at the quarry in the summer. They did everything together, six minds working together in the perfect mix of banter and love. Middle school brought them all together, something that had been maintained through their Senior Year. Little did El know, Junior Year would ruin everything.

Besides the tight-knit group El found herself a part of, her crush on Michael Wheeler was still innocent. It didn't gnaw at her from the inside like a deep hunger or cause her to toss and turn at night from overthinking about their interactions. Not yet at least. These were the last joyous years in which her childhood crush was manageable. She *could* hold Mike's hand or kiss his cheek without it being weird. They were still kids after all, no stigmatism attached yet.

"So," Max said, breaking El from thinking about happier times, "does this mean you are going to avoid him at all costs?"

El nodded quickly, pressing her right hand over her heart. "I promise. I want absolutely nothing to do with him."

"What happens if he catches you at your window? You can't exactly run away," Max pointed out, nudging El's leg with the tip of her Converse.

"I'll just say that my dad is calling me or something," El shrugged as if it were obvious. She was simply sure that she would be able to stay away from Mike.

And, it worked...until the following week.

One of the downsides of running Blue Sprinkles out of her kitchen was that El did not have as much space as she would like to work on

her creations or prepare batters. She also had to do majority of the work herself because Max was working at the Hawkins Times. This meant that when large orders, *especially* the one she found herself struggling to complete right now, came in, she was beyond stressed and frantic.

A new client had called a week ago, asking for a dozen cupcakes, two of every flavor (five, although El did have an extra special one every week). However, the same woman called at 9 that morning asking for a dozen cupcakes of each flavor, resulting in El wondering how the hell she was supposed to make 72 cupcakes to be delivered by 2 this afternoon.

She had her music blasting through the kitchen, the sounds streaming out of the open windows. Baking pans clattered against the kitchen cabinets, the countertops already dusted with flour that her shaky hands had poured. Her hair was messily thrown up in a high ponytail and her apron, her deemed “lucky” one that had little cartoon waffles all over it, was sloppily tied around her waist. To say she was frazzled was an understatement.

She barely heard the knock on her kitchen window, so focused on making sure her batters were combining nicely. In conjunction with the loud music, El shrieked when she turned around to see Michael Wheeler’s head peeking from the bottom of the window. Had it been a different day, she would have stumbled with her words. But, fortunately, she was already at peak anxiousness.

“I can’t talk, Mike! I’m busy!” she shook her head, shouting over the music as she lined trays with her signature blue and white polka-dot cupcake liners.

“I can see that,” he yelled back. A beat passed before, “Do you need help?”

Internally, her heart stopped at his words. Her mind also telling her that *no* , that was not a good idea. Her mouth, on the other hand, bypassing any logical thinking, replied with a “Front door’s open!”

She finished lining the trays when Mike walked through the threshold of the kitchen. She pointed him in the direction of the aprons before

she ran over to grab the vanilla base batter from the mixer.

“What do you need me to do?” Mike asked when he came back, a blue floral apron tied around his waist. He looked ridiculous, but El didn’t have time to laugh.

At this question, El began listing out orders to him.

“Dice the pumpkin I have over there and then, toss it into the pan to reduce!”

“Grab me more butter from the fridge!”

“Start rolling the fondant!”

For the next few hours, Mike did nothing but listen and follow all of El’s instructions. She hated to admit it, but she probably would never have gotten done in time if Mike hadn’t shown up.

She was icing the red velvet cupcakes, the last dozen, as Mike placed the others in her specially designed baby blue boxes, the logo on top and everything. As the panic inside of her started to subside, she finally let out a sigh of relief, realizing she would be able to make the delivery on time.

“Thank you for helping me,” she said quietly, a lull sounding in the music as she finished her decorations.

“It’s not a problem,” he smiled, grabbing the finished cakes and placing them in the box. Their fingers brushed gently and El ignored the familiar electricity she felt. Why did it never feel like that with Carter?

“I’m sure there are other things you would rather be doing on a Tuesday,” she snorted, brushing her hands on her apron. She pulled it off and chucked it onto the kitchen table. She carefully picked up two boxes, making her way to her car.

“You’d actually be surprised. I am quite a boring person,” Mike replied, following behind her. She carefully tucked the two boxes in the trunk and nearly yelped when she saw Mike approaching her with the other four, one box in each hand and one on each forearm.

Somehow, he properly balanced them despite his clumsy nature and she placed them in her car.

She shut the trunk and turned on her heel, about to ask if he would help her deliver them when she took in what he was wearing. To others, he was probably just wearing a black-and-white Yoda shirt. To her, she felt a flood of memories rush back. Her life turned sour when he first wore that shirt. Who knew Star Wars could break her heart?

Somehow, she asked her desired question and he agreed, saying he would be more than happy to complete the job with her. They climbed into her car and El began the drive to her client's house.

As they sat in silence, listening to the soft pop music playing and combating the exhaustion settling in after they used up all their adrenaline, El let her memories consume her.

Now, El always knew that she wasn't really a nerd in the typical sense. She was geeky when it came to baking and cooking and learning about how to fuel people's appetites. The boys on the other hand, had an affinity for all things science and math. In fact, Mike had even tutored her for a little bit. The boys loved science fiction and the paranormal and of course, Star Wars. El and Max had never really gotten into it, but out of love for their friends (and their small crushes), they watched the movies and watched them geek out regularly.

When high school came, the party was still the same mentally, but they were changing physically. The boys shot up in size and their voices got deeper. The girls got curvier and hid more secrets from the boys. El would always remember the way her heart pounded whenever Mike walked into a room, hair starting to get more wild and his muscles getting more defined. He was so beautiful that it drove her *crazy*.

Now that relationships were all that anyone ever talked about in high school, El found that her crush on Mike intensified. She frequently caught herself staring at him. She dressed up cutely everyday, hoping he would make a comment, which sometimes he did. She was always too hesitant to touch him though, scared that the feeling would be

too much for her. They talked and flirted and spent nearly every second attached at the hip. El fell in love with Michael Wheeler, her feelings intenser than ever. She always thought he felt the same and that hopefully, Junior Year would be the start of them finally dating.

And, then, Melanie Bosner came to Hawkins. El didn't even know that there was a new girl on the warm October day of her 11th grade year. She had been sitting in the cafeteria with everyone, waiting for Mike to tell him about the high mark she had gotten on the test he helped her study for. The moment the cafeteria doors opened, El's world came crumbling down.

Linked on his arm was Melanie, wearing a Star Wars t-shirt with a skirt, showing off long legs and a figure El felt she would never be able to live up to. She gulped as she watched this particular glow come on Mike's face as they talked avidly, most likely about science fiction as they always did. She ran off to the bathroom before Mike brought Melanie over to the table.

Everything after that happened so quickly. El watched as Mike slowly detached himself, opting to spend most after school hours with Melanie. Now *they* were going to Benny's for milkshakes on Fridays and *she* got to sit next to him during movie night. El found that watching them be together was unbearable. She would often leave her curtains open just a crack in order to see them reading comic books on his bed or working on homework together at his desk.

El realized quickly that she was a faraway thought in Mike's mind. The smile she had fallen in love with was being given to someone else. He had chosen straight blonde hair and bright blue eyes over her mess of curls and brown specks. El realized he only ever said hi to her through the window when Melanie wasn't around. It was as if their history as friends didn't exist. Or worse, that he only saw her as a friend.

The only person that knew about her feelings was Max. She had confided early on in middle school that she had her heart set on Michael Wheeler since she was a little girl. Max was the only member of the party that could *sense* how badly El's heart was breaking when Mike and Melanie would walk into school holding hands. Max was the only member of the party that let El cry on her shoulder for hours

and hours. Max was the only one who knew the truth.

El foolishly hoped that maybe they were just friends. Maybe Mike wanted a second best friend so that he could date her. Needless to say, El was wrong.

In December, a week before Christmas, Mike posted a picture to his social media profiles. Melanie's lips were planted on Mike's, a smile adorning his face, and the same black-and-white Yoda shirt he was wearing now freshly placed on his body. El didn't know what hurt worse: the picture or the caption. *Don't know what I've done my whole life without you.*

It was after that picture was posted that El's heart practically froze. She had watched heartbreak from the soap operas she was secretly obsessed with, but she never realized that it hurt *this* badly. She distanced herself from Mike, and practically all the boys in the party as well. She clung onto Max as if she was her life support and the only male she relied on was her dad.

Michael Wheeler broke her heart and he didn't even seem to realize.

Mike and Melanie dated through the end of high school, only breaking up because of the distance that would be between them when they started college. El secretly wished it hadn't been such an amicable break up and began to avoid Mike even more than she had for the past two years.

Luckily, Carter came around just as Mike had left for college and met his second girlfriend. If it weren't for Carter, El probably wouldn't have believed in love ever again. Then again, it didn't matter how she felt about Carter because whenever she looked at Mike, she felt the same ache in her heart that her sixteen year old self became accustomed to.

So, now as she sat in the car three years later with Michael Wheeler wearing the same shirt from that damned picture, she couldn't help but want to break down and cry.

Before she could really collapse around her thoughts, she pulled into the driveway of the client's house. They silently brought the boxes

inside, the woman thanking the pair graciously for accommodating her last minute request.

The woman handed El the payment for the cupcakes and said she would definitely be recommending Blue Sprinkles to all of her guests. At this comment, El felt happiness finally sprout back inside her.

“Have a nice afternoon with your boyfriend, dear!” the woman winked as she started to follow Mike who was already out the door. And, there the happiness goes.

El buckled her seatbelt, ignoring how she could practically feel Mike’s gaze on her face.

“Here,” she said, pulling half of the cash out of the envelope the woman had given her. “It’s the least I can do for you helping me.”

She outstretched the bills, but Mike gently pushed her hand away. “It’s not a problem. I had fun watching you in your mega-baker mode.”

El rolled her eyes, insisting again, but Mike refused again. They settled that she would make him a cake free of charge for whatever party his mom would be hosting in the future.

“You never told me why you called it Blue Sprinkles,” Mike said as they drove back home.

“Well, blue is my favorite color. And, sprinkles are on most of my desserts, so it seemed right,” El lied to him slightly.

El couldn’t remember why blue was her favorite color. Maybe it was because it was the color of the bracelet her father had given her. Maybe it was because it was the color of Cinderella’s dress. Or, maybe, it had to do with the color of the sugar cookie sprinkles that lined Mike Wheeler’s lips after she kissed him.

When they were six, she was a big Barbie fan. Most summer afternoons, Mike’s older sister, Nancy, would come over and they would play together. El had wanted a house for her dolls, equipped with an elevator and everything. Mike had already found his passion for gadgets, unaware of what engineering truly was yet.

So, for the next few weeks, Mike perfected a Barbie Dollhouse for El, made out of tissue boxes and pulleys and little decorations he had made out of bottle caps and construction paper. El had been so content, so over the moon with what he had done for her that she stood up and kissed him square on the mouth. They had just consumed a plate of freshly baked sugar cookies, courtesy of El's mom, and the blue sugar crystals from her lips now lined Mike's pink mouth. Not only had that been her first kiss, no matter how juvenile it was, it was also the day that El childishly decided that one day, she would marry Michael Wheeler.

Now, adult El could never tell adult Mike that he was the inspiration behind the name of her business. Never in a million years.

Their drive was over, their small talk concerning her business and his college experience coming to an end.

El's hand reached for the door handle, turning to thank him again. Except when she turned, Mike had a nervous look on his face, teeth biting down on his bottom lip.

"You know I've always liked you, right?" Mike said casually, as if he didn't have an idea of how much those few words would impact El.

She felt a wide range of emotions course through her, mouth opening in shock. Except, as she was about to reply with an "I've always loved you," Carter's face appeared in her mind.

"Thanks for the help today."

She stepped out of the car, walked up to her front door, and went inside without another word.

Notes for the Chapter:

ooooof okay, I know that Mike is kind of a rough looking character right now, but I promise I will explain more later. At least now we know why El is so guarded around him!

Out of curiosity, does anyone think they know what real book this AU is based off of? If you want to

know, just leave a comment :)

I hope you all are enjoying the story so far!! I really enjoy how it is shaping out. Let me know what you thought about the chapter! Comments make me smile :) See you soon!

~Veronica

3. New Insights

“What do you mean you’re not coming?” Carter’s sullen voice sounded from the static of the receiver.

“I am swamped with orders. And, I have a meeting with the realtor about a potential storefront,” El answered, ignoring the ache in her heart about what she was doing.

It had been three weeks since Carter left for New York and he wouldn’t be home until the fall semester that began in five weeks. El was supposed to visit him this weekend. And last weekend. And the weekend before that. But, El was indeed up to her elbows in orders and she had begun to look for a place to set up a real shop. And no, she hadn’t spent any time with Michael Wheeler since his hopefully mild confession. El didn’t know what she would do with herself if what he said had more than a friendly meaning. El didn’t trust herself enough to know that she wouldn’t leave Carter immediately if Mike did want her more than a friend.

“El, did I do something wrong? Why are you avoiding me?” he replied, voice growing shakier with every word.

El groaned in exasperation. “Not everything is about you, Carter! I just need to be close to the business right now. If everything slows down by next week, I promise that I’ll come.”

She heard a snort over the phone line before, “You and your bullshit promises. You told me that you and your friends cherished those damn things. Why is it you can’t keep a promise with me?”

“I was 12 years old when we made those rules! Sometimes promises just don’t work out! I’m sorry that my business is important to me. You should-”

“More important than me?” Carter cut her off. “El, we’ve been together for nearly a year now. For once, can you just put me above your career?”

“No, I can’t. This business is my life. Who’s to say we will even make

it to our anni-” El stopped herself as soon as she realized what words were tumbling out of her mouth. She was angry and annoyed and couldn’t believe that Carter was being this selfish. She didn’t mean what she was about to say.

“Really? Is that what you think? Was ‘I love you’ another one of your bullshit promises then?” Carter spat back, angry now versus dejected.

“It wasn’t. It never has been!” El clenched her hand around her phone, scared if she squeezed any harder it would break.

“Well, until you come up here and prove that to me, don’t even bother calling.”

El heard the *CLICK!* of the line disconnecting and tried to mull over what just happened. Were her promises to him really bullshit?

Two days had passed and El’s orders were steadily decreasing. If she hadn’t fought with Carter, she would be packing for New York. Unfortunately, her stubborn nature, sprouting from her dad, told her that he didn’t deserve to see her.

Besides, she had finally secured a storefront and had so much to do for it now. She needed to order new cupcake tins and paint the walls blue and order a decal for the front window. The space she had just put a downpayment on was right next to Melvald’s General Store, a perfect location in her opinion. The foot traffic from the already busy store would most likely carry over to her business. Before she knew it, she would be in bigger business than ever.

El was currently in the bare storefront, mentally placing where she would put her counters and cash register and how she would organize the kitchen. She needed to hire a local carpenter to build the tables and counters and such. She also needed to travel to wholesale stores to pick out industrial ovens. El knew the process of setting up the location would take some time, but it would be worth it. Her dreams of being a successful baker were finally coming true.

Smiling as she locked the empty building, she turned to actually go into Melvald's. Her dad had said they needed more laundry detergent and she figured she could get it as she was right next door.

El wandered down the aisles, grabbing the detergent, but also looking at the fall decorations that were out. Her dad always let her decorate the house, so she always enjoyed looking around for new things.

As El turned the corner to look at the Halloween merchandise, she slammed into someone of the same height.

“Oh, shoot I’m...Will?” she began to apologize, but then gasped as she realized who it was.

Will Byers seemed to be as stunned as her, mouth agape and taking her in. He hadn’t changed a bit in her opinion. They were still the same size and he still had the same straight haircut. He still wore jeans and flannel shirts, although he had a name tag pinned to his pocket, and had the same timid, but curious expression on his face. El hadn’t seen him since graduation. He was going to school in New York City, studying art, which he had always been flawless at. If baking was El’s number one skill, art was Will’s.

“El...I haven’t seen you in so long!” he finally perked up, the shock washing off as a smile came onto his face. They hugged tightly, as if time hadn’t come between them. They had been best friends since Kindergarten, but when the whole Mike fiasco occurred, she pulled herself away from all of the boys.

“How have you been? Is NYU treating you well?” El asked, genuinely interested.

“I’m great. NYU is *great*. It’s everything and more than I thought it would be. Congratulations on your business! We just found out you are moving in next door!” Will responded enthusiastically. He clearly had missed her too.

El beamed, “Thank you! It’s all happening so fast. It’s surreal to think that this is really my life.”

“Oh, I completely understand that feeling. I got to showcase my work

at the MET one night. I couldn't believe it was happening."

"Will! That's amazing! Congratulations!" El smiled. "What have you been up to this summer?"

"I'm just helping my mom out with the store," he shrugged, pointing to the name tag. "But, I am sure now we will be able to see a lot more of each other since you will be right next door."

"Definitely. You can help me paint if you want. I need to revamp a lot of what is inside," she told him as they started to walk towards the counter.

"Really? I would love to!" Will grinned, scanning El's items. "If you want, I could sketch some designs for you and I could paint them."

"Are you serious? I would *love* that!"

For the next several minutes, El and Will discussed what she had envisioned for the store. Will took some notes and for those few minutes, they felt like the same kids again. It was as if they had never separated.

"I really appreciate this, Will. I'll pay you and everything," she said after they were done. Will had started walking her to the front door.

"Oh no, you don't have to. I'll gladly accept free cake instead," he laughed, causing El to snort.

"That's exactly what Mi—" El started, but then stopped herself. Will noticed the look on her face and he chuckled.

"I already know. Mike has barely shut up about you since he saw you again," Will chuckled a little, rolling his eyes. While he thought this was funny, El's heart went straight to her throat.

"W-What are you talking about?" she asked softly, staring at Will with wide eyes.

"Between you and me, I think Mike's always been a little bit in love with you. I think he forgot about it until he saw you again," Will shrugged, laughing a little again. El's mouth dropped, her heart

pounding rapidly. She couldn't be hearing this right. There's *no* way.

"Are you being serious?" El bit her lip.

Will nodded, responding with, "He's a complicated guy, but I think part of him will always belong to you."

El stared back at Will, unsure of how to act. If Will was telling the truth, then Michael Wheeler had been in love with her this *whole* time. There had to have been a mistake. There is no world in which Michael Wheeler loves her.

El was about to ask Will for more information when the door opened, another customer coming in. The pair remembered where they were and jumped, realizing they still needed to go about their respective days.

The once inseparable best friends said goodbye to one another, solidifying their promise of painting together, before El walked away.

"There's got to be some sort of mistake, Max," El shook her head, her eyes focused on the details she was drawing into the fondant.

"But, what if there *isn't* any mistake? What are you going to do about it? I say you ditch Mr. Loser and go straight for Wheeler. After I kick his ass, of course," Max responded, filling one of the piping bags with the pink buttercream frosting El had made.

Mike had cashed in his free order favor the same afternoon that El had spoken with Will. Well, really, his mother, Karen, did. She wanted a cake and some other baked goods for her youngest daughter, Holly's, 10th birthday. When she asked about pricing, El had told her about her arrangement with Mike, immediately causing a smirk to linger on the woman's face. Was everyone aware of this crush Mike supposedly had on her?

"Why would I ever want to be with him? He broke my heart. He made me believe he wanted me just as much as I wanted him. I don't want to be with him anymore. I am so happy with Carter. I love

him,” El somewhat lied to her best friend. She still hadn’t spoken to Carter since their fight. She didn’t know what would happen of their relationship. She only knew she would never leave him for Mike. Part of her, the always-will-love-Mike part, however, desired to be with Michael Wheeler if the Carter thing *didn’t* in fact work out.

“You’re not in love with Carter,” Max snorted. “You’ve always been in love with Mike no matter how much you don’t want to admit it.”

El stared down at the sugar flowers she was dusting with glitter. Max was always the mirror reflecting her inner thoughts back to her. Even if she *did* love Mike, she couldn’t get past the fact that he had chosen not one, but two girls over her. If he loved her so much, why didn’t he want to be with her?

The girls finished the cake in silence, knowing that Max’s words had spurred El to realize the truth. They iced the cupcakes pink and added the finishing details to the cake. Holly was a big fan of the beach and the tropical islands. So, El had made her cake luau themed. The cake itself was a mix of blues and whites for waves and with crushed rice crispy treats at the bottom for sand. She had iced on palm trees and coconuts and birds and surfers. The rest of the cake had sugar flowers that were also on top of the cupcakes. At the top of the cake, rested a large pink lily with the words *Happy 10th Birthday Holly!* written in purple cursive icing. The cake had been one of El’s bests.

“I’m sorry if I pissed you off,” Max spoke softly as the girls boxed up the cupcakes.

El couldn’t help but sigh, smiling as she finally looked at her best friend. “You didn’t piss me off. You know I just can’t handle this kind of truth.”

“I think it’s time you face the facts, Ellie,” Max placed her hand on El’s, reassuring her that it would be alright. El squeezed her hand, all her annoyance resolved as they finished up.

After a few more minutes, the girls grabbed the cupcake boxes and walked next door to the Wheeler residence. The door swung open to reveal Mrs. Wheeler, dressed up and looking frazzled.

El had always admired Karen Wheeler. She was well put together and did absolutely everything for her kids. She had even been somewhat of a second mother to El when her own passed away. Karen had helped El learn more about baking and was always very supportive of her endeavors. El looked up to the woman like she once had with her own mother.

“El! Wonderful, you’re here. I was just finishing up the food, and was going to come and get you,” Karen smiled at the girls, saying hello to Max as well. The pair followed Mrs. Wheeler into the kitchen where she had set up an area for the cakes and Holly’s presents.

El would be lying if she said it wasn’t weird walking in here. It was always odd every time she brought in an order. She once ran around these rooms with Mike, playing hide and seek or eating too many sweets. She was familiar of this house like it was her own. Yet, it was always foreign coming in here after everything that had happened.

They finished placing the cupcakes the exact way that Mrs. Wheeler had wanted it when El turned around in order to retrieve the cake. Unfortunately, she smacked right into the tall boy she was hoping she would be able to miss.

Somehow, looking at his face now after what Will had said to her made her brain almost short circuit. He was so beautiful. He always was.

“I see she cashed in that favor,” Mike chuckled, looking down at El with what she could only pinpoint as adoration and hope. God, she would have done anything to see that look when she was 17.

“Hey, a promise is a promise,” she smiled back, unable to contain herself. It was as if being around Mike flipped a switch inside her. She couldn’t control how she was around him, a mixture of happiness, yet fear bubbling her stomach.

“Do you need help getting the cake over here?” Mike asked her, biting his lip as if nervous of her response.

El glanced at Max who was in an animate conversation with Mrs. Wheeler. El sighed, but then nodded as she looked back at Mike.

They walked in silence to her house, the looming tension only a reminder of what Mike had confessed in the car the last time they were together. It was an awkward silence, teetering on unbearable.

“I heard you bought a storefront,” Mike coughed as they walked into her house and headed for the kitchen.

“It’s a pretty good location. I hope it does well,” El responded, reaching for the baseboard of the cake.

“If everything you make is like this,” Mike nodded towards the cake in awe, “then you won’t have any problems.”

El blushed, a silent thank you for the compliment. The pair carefully made their way back to Mike’s house. After successfully putting the cake on the table, Mike looked at El nervously.

“Uh, about what I said the other day...” he began, playing with his hands.

Thankfully, or sadly, Mrs. Wheeler cut her son off as she hugged El tightly.

“Thank you again sweetheart. And, I will be sure to tell all the Moms about you!” she beamed, lovingly rubbing El’s back.

The women finished their goodbyes and thank you’s before El left the house without another word to Mike. She let out a breath of relief as she narrowly avoided whatever explanation he was about to provide to her.

“You’ll never believe what Mrs. Wheeler just told me,” Max smirked over at El as they made their way back to the house. El sent her a curious look.

“She always hoped you and Mike would end up together. And, she’s glad her son is trying to make that happen,” Max teased as she sprinted up to the house past El, wanting to torture her a little with this new information.

El gasped in shock, unable to move from where she stood.

Was Michael Wheeler really in love with her?

Notes for the Chapter:

oof okay so this is interesting. What do you guys think is going to happen? Let me know in the comments :)

I also added another chapter to this story! As I was writing, I got some new ideas, so I extended it a bit. It might get extended again, but I have to see where my writing takes me.

I hope you all are enjoying this AU! I am really proud of it. Let me know what you think in the comments :) Until the next chapter!

~Veronica

4. Splattered Paint

One week later, El still hadn't contacted nor had been contacted by Carter. Alarmingly, she was okay with this. It was as if him being away gave her some form of relief. His love weighed her down sometimes, made her feel guilty for not being as committed to him as he suggested. El Hopper may love Carter Wilkins, but the time away from him had allowed her to relish in the freedom she hadn't felt in a long time.

This newfound freedom has nothing to do with Michael Wheeler. Absolutely not.

The humid early August air coursed in and out of the Blue Sprinkles storefront. It was unusually hot for a summer evening in Hawkins so, El had the door wide open and placed several small fans on the newspaper-covered floor. She wiped her forehead clean of sweat, took a long swig from her water bottle, and bent down to pour more baby blue paint into the pan.

She had started the task of painting her new location two days ago. When orders were low and she felt comfortable enough to step away from her home kitchen, she went out and purchased all that Will had instructed her to buy. She was practically up to her elbows in paint cans, brushes, pans, and tape. Will would be helping her on the weekends, stenciling out the sketches of cupcakes and smiley faces made out of sprinkle bits. El had ordered the window decal with her logo and was waiting for its arrival in the next few weeks.

To say that El was preoccupied was an understatement.

Fortunately, the heavy workload allowed her to shift her focus away from Mike. She didn't harp on the confession he still hadn't explained. She didn't overthink how Max explained that Karen Wheeler practically *gushed* at the thought of Mike and El. More importantly, she didn't wrap her mind around the words Will had told her. If she didn't have so little free time, El thought she would have exploded from the worrying and curiosity and absolute ache she felt.

Despite her long days filled with vanilla and paint, El couldn't avoid her troubles at night. She often laid awake for hours, staring up at her glowing stars with the window ajar. Her heartbeat practically matched up with the *TINK!* she could hear coming across the grass expanse from Mike's bedroom. She couldn't imagine what he was up so late doing nearly every night. Nonetheless, the small sounds were enough to set El's mind reeling into what she had been learning this summer. She hated herself for it. After everything he put her through, why did she still feel the same airy feeling in her chest that she did when they were younger? Why was she craving to kiss him again, more passionately than their first and only kiss? Why was she willing to get her heart broken again?

El's worrying thoughts didn't stop. Every night, her mind was filled with spiraling images of what could have been and what could be. She hadn't been in the same room as Mike, but he wasn't easily avoidable. She would come upstairs after baking all day and he would be in bed, headphones on, and watching something on his computer (*Star Wars*, probably). She would come home after painting all day, hands white at first from the base coat, when he would spot her and make a foolish joke about her hands ("If only it were called 'Red Sprinkles.' Then, I'd catch you red-handed!"). Every time she saw him from his bedroom window or out in the backyard playing with Holly or in town walking around with her once-best friends, she felt pieces of her old self return. It was as if Michael Wheeler was the key to her freedom. Even if she hated it and could barely admit it to herself.

However, when after she finally fell asleep and woke up again the next morning, her thoughts from the night before were always shed. Her hard exterior and tough walls were built up again and she would not dwell on her thoughts of Mike. That was, until she saw him that day. It was the same numbing routine over and over again.

El had finished the base coat and was now working on painting everything blue. She was making pretty good time considering she was working by herself for only a few hours a day. She intended on spending her night doing as much as she could while the sun set and filled the rooms with a bright orange glow.

El was moving at her heels, moving her head from side to side,

completely lost in what she was doing. She sang at the top of her lungs to the old 80's Hits playlist that Will had made her in high school. Sure, she had blue paint splattered at her ankles and her hair was messily flying into her face in curls, but El was making it. All of her dreams were finally coming true. This little shop was her future.

El was so lost in her music and less than wonderful dance moves that she didn't hear footsteps tread across the newspaper. Standing in the center of the room, Michael Wheeler watched as El shook her hips and tapped her toes.

"Don't touch me please, I cannot stand the way you tease," El sang out loudly, moving the roller up and down over the base coat.

"Tainted love hm hm," she hummed out as the song began to fade. Her movements came to an abrupt halt when clapping sounded behind her. El jumped around, dropping the roller and nearly screaming.

"Mike, what the *hell* ?" she said when she realized who was still clapping for her. She leaned against the dry area of the wall, hand clenched over her heart. She ignored how it only seemed to beat faster upon seeing the dazzling smirk playing at his lips. "You seriously could kill a woman like that."

"I didn't mean to intentionally scare you! I needed to pick up something for my mom," Mike said through laughter, holding up a plastic bag from Melvald's. "Besides, how could I resist from watching those famous Hopper moves?"

"Oh, shut up," El's face began to heat up, most definitely turning red. "You act like yours are so much better."

Mike threw his bag on the floor, nodding his head a bit as Michael Jackson's "Beat It" played in the background.

"I take that as a personal challenge, Hopper," he smiled again, turning sideways and very poorly attempting to moonwalk. His sneakers were getting caught on the newspaper, giving him broken steps versus a glide. He attempted to move his arms back and forth like in the iconic "Smooth Criminal" dance, but his lanky arms just

flopped around with no real direction.

El couldn't help it. She laughed hard at his dance moves, the emotional wall coming down immediately. She clutched her stomach from finding everything he did to be absolutely hysterical. She felt her chest become light again and butterflies immediately started to swarm her stomach.

The noise of El's giggles appeared to be music to Mike's ears because he went even more outlandish with his moves. He tried to do turns and kick his legs up in order to hit imaginary bad guys. When the song reached its peak, Michael Wheeler raised up onto his toes to the best of his ability and legitimately grabbed his crotch.

This final move is what caused El to have tears stream down her face, breath hitching. The feeling that flooded through her veins as Mike finally broke down laughing as well could only be described as what she hadn't felt in a long time: normal. Not that normal was bad, but El hadn't felt this way around Mike in years. He had always made her feel safe and warm and cared for and *loved*. He could be telling her a story or making her laugh or simply listening to her and it had felt normal. When she was younger, she assumed that's just what being friends felt like. But, laughing harder than she had in a long time with Michael Wheeler made her realize that this normal feeling only happened between soulmates.

"Y-You have gotten worse," El said finally, her breath just coming back to normal tempo.

"It's even funnier when I am tipsy. You would probably laugh harder than now," Mike said through ragged breath, his smile never lingering from his face.

El's eyes widened, fake seriousness coming over her face. "I need to get you drunk now."

"As long as you don't take advantage of me," Mike smirked back at his response, clearly meaning something different from what she was talking about.

El coughed, standing straight up from the wall she was previously

slouching on. She shook her head. *Don't think about what he was insinuating! Just don't!*

Mike stepped closer, standing right next to her. The previously returned oxygen left her again, but to her dismay, he was staring at the partially painted wall instead.

"How long have you been painting for?" he asked her curiously, looking at where she had just stopped.

"About a week or so. I just have to finish these two walls. I am going to stay until it gets dark to finish," she shrugged, looking out at the slowly setting sun. She had at least another hour.

"Well, you won't be able to get much done if you keep getting lost in your music," Mike nodded, as if on a mission. He bent down and grabbed the second roller that El had out. "It is probably best that I stay and help."

El's heart thumped. "Oh no, you don't have to do that. It's getting late."

Mike looked down at her, eyes dazzling with that familiar hope El saw the other day. "I don't mind," he whispered softly, their eyes locking. El could feel her center of gravity shift forward, her toes almost willing her to lean in and kiss him.

Mike was the one to straighten up this time and cough. "Besides, as someone older than you, I don't think it's best that you're out here alone."

El rolled her eyes, picking up the spare roller, "You're older by two months! Big deal. But, I am not going to reject any help."

They smiled at each other before setting off to work, painting over the white with El's favorite color. The pair would hum, or sometimes badly sing, the music playing in the background as they worked.

Occasionally, El would glance over at Mike, lip between his teeth and focused on doing a good job for her. The fading light was gently pooling over his face, highlighting his high cheekbones and sporadic freckles. El didn't think he had ever looked so handsome.

The next thing El saw was a splatter of blue. Literally, she felt wet blue paint across her face and arms, beginning to drip. She could make out the bright color as the curve of a blue dot on her nose fell down. El gasped in shock.

“Staring is deemed to be quite rude, sweetheart,” Mike smiled, flicking paint on her one more time.

El shook her head, a smirk adorning her face. “Oh, you’re dead, Wheeler!”

El shook her own roller at Mike, splattering his freckles and neck with the blue paint. He let out a high pitched yelp at the coldness of the paint before laughing. He darted past her and into the back room where the kitchen would be. El chased after him and they ran in circles around the center island.

As they stood opposite of each other, they both had jovial, yet threatening looks on their faces. El would lean one way and Mike would copy before they went back and forth with each other. This went on for several seconds before Mike took a leap closer and splattered El once again.

“Ugh, stop it!” El laughed loudly, running past him and back into the main room. She pulled Mike’s t-shirt towards her tightly and moved the roller up the right side of his face. “There we go. Now, we’re even.”

“Hey! I didn’t put that much on you!” Mike laughed, dropping his roller into the pan with El’s following shortly afterwards. El laughed loudly at how oddly the orange light now contrasted with his blue face.

“You look like such a dork. Almost like Avatar gone wrong,” El giggled, practically devouring the amusement in Mike’s eyes.

“Or, like a very large, slightly awkward Smurf,” Mike offered back, clearly relishing at how happy he was making El.

The pair continued laughing at the paint fight that had commenced, making teasing jabs at one another. Like clockwork, however, just as

their laughs died down, the music switched onto the hauntingly beautiful song that El would have skipped over if Mike had never walked in.

Realization hit both of them as their smiles fell and the room filled with heated tension. Their eyes locked and their hearts beat faster. They hadn't listened to this song together since that night five years ago, the gym speakers not even doing it justice.

As "Every Breath You Take" began playing, El's head began swirling with the memory of that night, of that time in her life. That was one of her last moments with Mike before everything changed. She often thought that everything changed *because* of that night.

The party had never attended any of their middle school dances before. They thought they were dumb and juvenile and could be doing much better things with their time. Unfortunately, their mothers, and one father, wouldn't let them graduate without at least attending one dance. So, the party attended the Snowball for the first and only time during their 8th grade year.

It wasn't the sort of dance where you had to go with a date, but El would be lying if she said she hadn't hoped she would have one. Luckily, her wish was beyond fulfilled when Mike stuttered an invitation to be his date for the night. The pair had a fun time with their friends, all dressed up and performing quite bad dance moves.

When the slow song began playing, they both turned red, knowing what they had to do. However, the pair had already started their long history. It was clear they liked each other, or so El thought, based on their nervous glances and sneaky hand holding underneath a blanket during movie night. Dancing in public together only heightened El's emotions. To her, it was as if Mike was letting her into his world romantically.

They walked to the dance floor and tentatively placed their hands on each other, Mike's hands delicately at her hips while El's arms were looped around his neck. They swayed gently. The entire time their eyes were locked on each other. They spent the entire time not speaking, just gazing at each other. The same tension that filled the air now surrounded them. It was as if there was a promise in the air.

A promise of *something* . That something, what El dreamed to be their ultimate union, never came. Her dreams of happily ever after faded.

El forgot about this in the present though. The new tension was still a promise, but it was a new kind of something. It was apologetic, but longing. It was everything she had dreamed of and feared for combined.

“Do you wanna dance?” Mike blurted out as the lyrics began to play, the same stutter adorning his lips as it had when they were 14.

El nodded, her heart lurching at his invitation. They shuffled closer together in the center of the empty room. Mike’s hands found her hips like they did years ago and El wrapped her arms around his neck. Although this time around, she stood on her toes slightly to reach him.

Their eyes locked again, almost as if no time had passed and they were stuck in the same moment. The glowing light from outside had turned pink, swallowing them whole in a warm embrace. If El could remember the feeling of any moment in her life, she would choose this one. All the pain and regrets and personal promises to stay the hell away from Michael Wheeler faded away. All she felt was love, so much of it.

El and Mike kept watching each other, slowly, but unknowingly pulling the other closer. It was as if an imaginary string would always bring them together. El felt herself rise on her tiptoes even more, Mike’s grip tightening on her hips.

“El,” Mike’s breath hitched, their noses just touching as he kept his eyes locked with hers.

El could feel the thrum of her heart, desire ripping through her at what was so close to being hers. Mike started to dip his head lower, their noses brushing even more. Their lips were so close to meeting, El’s eyes closing. Just as El was about to feel herself melt into Mike, a voice broke through the storefront.

“What the fuck are you doing?” rang Carter’s angered voice, immediately causing the pair to jump apart.

El's heart sped up, not from her feelings, but from anxiety. She watched as Carter sized up the scene, the music beginning to fade in the background.

"Is this why you haven't come to see me? Because of him?" Carter's voice sounded again, not breaking El from her frozen shock. Mike appeared to be in the same predicament, unmoving and speechless.

"I thought you hated him, El. I thought you loved me," Carter shook his head. "Well, I don't need you anymore."

With that, Carter turned around and ran off into the darkening sky. His disappearance snapped El back to life, the air nearly knocking her off her feet.

Mike began to say something, but El was already on the move and running out the front door.

"Carter, wait!" she screamed, chasing after him. As she tried to catch up to the boy who was supposed to have her heart, the boy who really had it, shut the music off and left.

Notes for the Chapter:

Not gonna lie, this is probably my favorite chapter of this story/chapter that I have ever written. It is just so fluffy and emotional and Mileven is just too cute? And, who doesn't love a cheesy Snowball scene?

Additionally, I am extending this story by one more chapter. I know I originally only planned four, but my writing took me elsewhere from my original plan. I hope you guys are excited to have two more chapters!

Anyways, I really hope you guys liked this update! Let me know in the comments :) Also, what do you think is going to happen? Until next time!

~Veronica

5. Starry Night

El's phone had been ringing on repeat for two days. Voicemail after voicemail kept piling up until her dad called back her clients and said she would be taking a week or two off for personal reasons. When he tried to give it back to her, she pushed it back into his hands, asked him to close the door, and buried herself underneath her covers once more.

She should really be blaming herself. After all, *she* was the one who let this happen. She was the one that nearly kissed the probable love of her life without breaking up with her boyfriend first. It wasn't the break up that was eating at her. It was the cruel words Carter had said to her. He cut her up, his words the blade and her emotions the prey. El was also consumed by the fact that when she returned to the storefront, cheeks soaked with continuously falling tears, Michael Wheeler was nowhere to be found.

The sun had just started shining into her bedroom, the blinking alarm clock numbers letting El know that it was now 6 in the morning. Ever since that night in the store, she had left the curtains open. When she was curled up in bed, unmoving and crying her eyes out, she watched the bedroom next door. The lights never came on and Michael Wheeler was never around.

Every time El woke up, she was hit with the ache of what had happened. Despite how much she slept, she had no energy to get up, only to think. Unfortunately, her mind kept circling back to that night.

El caught up to Carter, leaned over his car. His elbows were bent on the hood and his face was in his hands. El could see he was shaking just as much as her.

"Carter, I swear. It wasn't what it looked like," El tried to assure him, not believing herself in the slightest. Her voice was shaking and her heart was pumping on fear.

Carter's face lifted from his face, body turning to look at her slowly. He had a scowl on his face, jaw clenched.

“Not what it looks like? Are you kidding me? You were just about to make out with him! With Mike!” Carter yelled, his voice probably sounding throughout the quiet town. Luckily, most of the stores were closing and no one was outside. El didn’t think she could bare the humiliation of someone seeing or hearing this.

“And, look at yourself! You’re covered in paint! Did you guys have a juvenile paint fight, too?” Carter spoke, shaking his face while hot, angry tears rolled down.

“H-He was just helping me,” El’s voice came out quietly, almost like a squeak.

Carter snorted, “Helping you? Helping you get off or something? It’s not like you’ve seen me anytime recently. You probably just wanted to hook up with the guy you used to throw yourself at. He finds you at a moment of weakness, and you’re willing to listen.”

El’s jaw dropped, horrified that he was attacking her like this. She understood he was mad. She was about to cheat on him. But, that doesn’t mean he had the right to act as though something more than a kiss was about to happen.

“I never threw myself at him! You know what he did to me!” El shook her head in horror.

“Yeah, so you’re supposed to hate him! Not lock lips with him!” Carter yelled in exasperation. “How many times have you seen him this summer?”

El grew quiet. There was no way she could justify spending so much time with Mike when she hadn’t seen Carter once. Her silence, however, made matters worse.

“Have you been hooking up with him behind my back? Some sort of little revenge thing on him?” Carter accused her, his anger blowing matters way out of proportion.

“What the hell? I would never do that! I love you!” El tried to salvage their relationship. Her words couldn’t save it, not anymore.

“You love me? Bullshit, Jane. You haven’t visited me once. Whenever

you're sad or shut off, it always has to do with that asshole! You probably still love him or whatever. But, you're not worth it, Jane. You're not worth this back and forth. You don't know how to love when you're too caught up about shit that happened in high school! And, you know what? I don't want to be with a child anymore. I'm done. We're done," Carter said through clenched teeth, fists tight and shaking with anger. He didn't hold back on El whatsoever, even if what he was saying wasn't true.

The words hit El like a ton of bricks. She was worthless. Mike didn't want her years ago. Who's to say he just wanted a summer fling? Carter could only take so much of her. Maybe she was unloveable.

Without another word from either of them, Carter got into the car and drove away.

The repeating cruel words circled around El's mind for hours, ultimately causing her to fall asleep again from the exhaustion of it all. This heartbreak wasn't as painful as what she had continuously felt for Mike, but it was still sore. She gave *everything* to Carter. Even if she wasn't in love with him, especially in these last few weeks, their break up still stung.

In desperate need of a shower and some food, El dragged herself out of bed and into her bathroom. Her hair was in knots, the curls all bunched together. Her eyes were dark and puffy, rings around the edges. Her cheeks were sunken in and her clothes were sticking to her with sweat. El stared at herself in the mirror while the water ran in the shower in order to warm up. She looked disheveled and heartbroken and outright depressed. Wanting to eradicate this, she got into the shower.

The warm water refreshed her body, almost waking her up from the stupor she had found herself in the past few days. She washed her hair and scrubbed her face and tried to find any semblance of herself in this broken version. When she was done, she combed her hair, put on fresh pajamas, and tried to fix up her face. El even tried to smile a little, but it dropped immediately. After all, fake smiles are the easiest to find.

El trudged down the stairs into the kitchen where her dad was looking through some folders, most likely looking at cases for work.

He immediately perked up upon seeing El looking somewhat like her normal self.

“Hey, kid. It’s good to see you down here,” he smiled at her. Jim was no idiot, though. He could still see the pain etched on his daughter’s face. El had refused to tell him what Carter had said, but he knew that whatever it was, made his daughter twinge with pain.

El quietly nodded, going into the fridge. She pulled out some leftover Chinese food, popping it onto a plate and into the microwave.

“Ellie,” Jim’s voice rang through the kitchen quietly. El turned around to look at her dad, eyes full of exhaustion and sadness. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

El shook her head. She knew that if she told her dad, he would become so enraged that he would probably drive up to New York and kick Carter’s ass. As much as she would’ve liked that, she didn’t want to meddle with him anymore. It was over and the best she could do was try and forget.

“Is it so bad that I just want to know why my daughter is so heartbroken?” his caring voice spoke again, the beeping of the microwave cutting him off at the end. El sighed, knowing she couldn’t avoid this forever.

So, as she ate, she told the story to her dad. From the moment she walked into the storefront to paint to the second she went back in tears. Jim never interrupted her, just taking everything in. However, upon El recounting her fight with Carter, Jim got a rather murderous look in his eyes.

“And, I don’t know what to do now, dad. I was ready to just *settle* for Carter. He made me happy and I thought I could live a nice life with him. But, now that is all gone. I ruined everything,” El shook, no tears coming out. It was as if she used all of her tears up. “What’s even worse is that I feel awful about what Mike heard. He thinks I hate him, which part of me still does. But...”

El fell into silence, realizing what she was about to say. If she admitted this out loud, there would be no turning back. She would

never be able to climb out of the wound of her emotions for Michael Wheeler again.

“But, what Ellie?” Jim asked softly, gently rubbing El’s hand for comfort.

El shook slightly, tears finding their way out of El’s eyes. “But, I love Mike. I don’t think I ever fell out of love with him. I was distracted, but I never stopped loving him.”

At this confession, El continuously sobbed. Jim brought her chair closer and hugged her tightly, trying to comfort his daughter. It had taken El nearly two years to admit what she just said. It didn’t matter if Mike was with Melanie or Mackenzie or any other girl. El would always love him. She had loved him from the moment he made her that Barbie dollhouse. El thought back to what Will said about Mike, how he was always a little bit in love with her. Perhaps part of El’s heart would always belong to Michael Wheeler.

El and Jim sat in silence for several minutes, El’s tears eventually subsiding. She pulled back from her dad’s now soaked uniform and wiped her eyes.

“I’m scared, dad,” she whispered when she looked at her dad again. “What if I’ve ruined everything? What if nothing will ever really happen now?”

Jim rubbed his daughter’s back and said, “You will never know that for sure if you don’t talk to Mike. You can’t just let fear get the best of you.”

El nodded, completely comprehending what her dad was saying. Maybe it was time that her fear of rejection didn’t get the best of her. She did have proof of his affection from Will. Hell, he even said he always liked her a few weeks ago! Yes, maybe they would have to talk it through, but El shouldn’t slink away from fear. She deserved to be happy.

The pair talked a little bit more, Jim telling El that if he ever saw Carter again, he would definitely be kicking his ass. El couldn’t help, but finally crack a real smile at that.

El got up from the table and went to go wash her plate in the sink. She stared outside at the bright afternoon. Maybe she would be able to pull herself out of this daze after the conversation with her dad. Maybe she would even talk to Mike soon.

El was washing off the utensils when a shout erupted from outside the open window. Her head turned to the Wheeler's backyard to see all of her once male best friends playing with water guns.

“Hey, asshole! Watch the hair!” Dustin Henderson shouted, viciously pumping his water gun at Lucas Sinclair. They hadn’t changed a bit. Maybe they were taller and a little more facially defined from what El remembered. However, they still wore their familiar nerdy shirts and were equipped with bad language.

El kept watching the boys, her head craning while trying to see if she could spot a certain curly haired boy. He must have been on the far, opposite side of the house because she could only spot Will, Dustin, and Lucas.

Their shouting intensified, Lucas trying to ambush Will from behind. Dustin was running in circles, hiding behind trees and spraying his victims from hiding. Suddenly, Michael Wheeler appeared, running straight towards Lucas and spraying him away from Will.

“Ha, gotcha!” Mike laughed loudly as Dustin sprayed him.

Upon seeing Mike for the first time since their almost kiss as well as the first time at all at his house, her hand that was currently scrubbing her knife clean slipped and she cut her finger.

“Ow!” she hissed, dropping the knife and sponge into the sink.

“Ellie! Are you okay?” Hopper looked up from his work, watching as El began to run her finger under the faucet.

She nodded, gulping and watching as Mike laughed with his friends. It was almost as if he were okay. It was as if he wasn’t hurt by what happened. This greatly concerned El, her bravery slinking back into itself. Perhaps she would always love Michael Wheeler, but maybe, their timing would always be wrong

That night, El closed her curtains and kept the windows shut. She faced away from the curtains and tried to think about anything, but the smile that was on Mike's face that afternoon. Was he seriously not affected by what happened? He had heard Carter say that El hated him, or that she had hated him in the past. Additionally, where had he been for the past two days? This was the first time she saw him at home.

Nonetheless, El tried to push away all thoughts about Mike as the darkness of her room surrounded her. She was just drifting off to sleep when a soft *PLINK!* sounded. El rubbed her eyes and turned around. Was she dreaming? Another *PLINK!* came, bouncing off of the window. Could it be?

She pulled herself out of bed and pulled her curtains back. Through the window panes, she could see Mike sitting on the ledge of his window sill, long legs swinging through the cool nighttime breeze. His face lit up when he saw her, knocking El with a breath of fresh air. Was he not mad at her?

After opening the windows, El softly said, "What have you been throwing?"

Mike smiled triumphantly, holding up a box of paper clips. El looked down at the grassy land between their houses, barely spotting the few that had fallen.

"What were you doing?" Mike asked her, setting the box back onto his desk.

El gestured back to her dark room, "Sleeping."

"Sleeping? It's not even ten o'clock," he frowned. El leaned forward, allowing the moonlight to hit her face. She gestured to her baggy eyes.

“I am quite emotionally exhausted,” she sighed in admittance, not sure how he would react. The large frown that quickly adorned his face surged El’s heart with hope. Maybe he did still care about her.

“What happened?” he grimaced, most likely thinking back to the last night they saw each other.

El eyed Mike, her eyes immediately swelling with tears. *I realized I love you. That’s what happened.*

“I was viciously broken up with,” El shrugged, hiding her part of her answer and wiping away her falling tears.

When she looked back at him, his face tightened with anger, but then softened with what looked like relief. To her dismay, he swung his legs back into his room and over his desk.

“Where are you going?” El frowned. She couldn’t take rejection right now. It would be too much.

“I’ll be back in like five minutes. Just stand back from the window, okay?” he told her before disappearing into the shadows of his room.

El let out a sigh of relief and turned away from the window. She turned towards her desk and stared at herself, eyeing her face in the small mirror she had. She looked better than she had this morning, but her face was still looming with sadness. El stared at herself for what felt like minutes, lost in what had happened, when a loud *THUD!* sounded from behind her.

El rushed back to the window, nearly screaming when she saw what Mike was doing. He had detached the shelf from his closet, the strong, white-coated metal type shelf. He had linked one end at the edge of his window and caught the other side with hers.

“What the hell are you doing?” El asked in horror as she watched Mike climb onto the shelf.

“Just hold it steady on your side,” he said calmly. At this request, El rushed to grip the shelving against the window frame in order to give Mike enough support to get across.

When he finally reached her, he clumsily fell, taking them both down onto the floor. El couldn't breathe. Michael Wheeler was on top of her, even if it was on accident. His head had fallen onto her shoulder and his full weight was pressed on her. She felt like she might be dreaming.

However, her dreams came to a halt as she could hear footsteps approaching her room. Her dad probably heard the noises!

"Shit," El rolled from underneath Mike and hastily climbed onto her bed. "Just hide down there for a second!"

She managed to fold herself under the covers just in time before her dad walked into her room.

"Hey, kid? Are you okay? I kept hearing noises," Jim asked concerned as he looked at his daughter who was out of breath.

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine," she lied, nodding and praying that Mike was out of sight and Jim wouldn't notice the makeshift bridge at her window. "I just fell out of bed. Weird, I know."

Jim frowned at the way his daughter was acting, stepping into her room slightly. "You've been acting a little weird since you ate earlier. Is it because you saw Mike again?"

Oh my god, dad! Please stop talking!

"W-What? No, I'm fine. I'm just really tired. I'm fine, I promise," El scrambled, hoping her dad wouldn't press the issue while Michael freaking Wheeler was hiding on her bedroom floor.

Jim sighed, told El he loved her, and then, left her bedroom. El flopped back onto her bed as his footsteps faded back down the hall to his own bedroom. El turned her head to see that Mike had shifted upwards on the floor in order to sit up against her bed frame.

El watched as the moonlight poured into her room and perfectly hit Mike's profile and his curly hair. Her fingers twitched slightly, a sign that she wanted nothing more than to run her fingers through his curly hair. *He wouldn't notice, would he?*

El carefully shifted on her bed, hand shakingly outstretching to just touch his hair when Mike abruptly turned around, El nearly poking his eye out. She recoiled her hand and ignored how hot her face had turned.

“What were you doing?” he frowned at her.

“Uh, just getting your attention,” she shrugged, trying to play it off as if it were nothing.

Mike turned his head back, staring out the window. “We need to talk.”

All the oxygen from El’s lungs escaped, her heart racing with new anxiety. Whatever he was about to say, couldn’t be good.

“Well, really, I need to talk. I need to do some explaining,” he said after a few seconds, turning back to look at her. El’s face scrunched in confusion.

“What are you talking about?” El whispered, looking at the sullen eyes of the boy she loved.

“You deserve to know the truth, El...about everything,” he gulped, nerves etched all over his face. El’s heart stopped again, her breathing heavy and labored. Was she ready for this? She certainly never expected to get an explanation.

She nodded and reached out her hand. She motioned her head towards her bed, silently telling him to come sit up with her. He turned around, took her hand, and moved to sit on her bed. They sat with their legs crossed and staring at each other, the moonlight barely allowing them to look at each other’s faces. The only real source of light was the stick on stars on the ceiling.

“Do you remember how earlier in the summer I told you that I’ve always liked you?” Mike broke the silence, his hand still holding El’s as they sat together. He carefully laced their fingers together. El’s heart was pounding at the contact.

“Of course, I do. How could I forget that?” she replied softly.

Mike smiled a little before taking a deep breath. “Well, when I said that, I lied a little bit.”

El frowned, starting to pull her hand away. Was he being serious? Was he just trying to humiliate her? Before she could get her hand away, he held onto it tighter.

“I should’ve told you that I’ve always loved you,” he spoke breathlessly, his confession hanging in the air and bringing tension between the two.

El’s heart soared, momentarily forgetting about the pain he had put her through. If Michael Wheeler had always loved her, then, he most certainly still loved her now. However, the reality of their history flooded back into her head and she frowned again.

“If you did, then why did you never say anything? W-Why have we never been together?” El asked skeptically, her voice shaking as the thought of Mike and Melanie walking into the cafeteria for the first time resurfaced in her brain.

Mike looked down at their hands at El’s questions, almost as if he needed the prospect of the future to give him strength to discuss the past. When his gaze finally met El again, his eyes were glistening, almost as if he were about to cry.

“Did you ever feel that when we entered high school that things were just...different?” he asked her softly.

“Definitely,” she nodded in understanding. It was as if they had felt the same way about the switch in their relationship

“I thought there was something wrong with me. I thought that we always had some sort of bond. It started from when we were younger and it was always just *there*. Especially, when we were in middle school, I felt like we were even closer. We always were together and sneakily holding hands and just being too nervous to say anything,” Mike started. El practically felt the words Mike was saying. She knew all these emotions so well.

“Asking you to be my date to the Snowball was one of the best things

I have ever done. I was dreading that dance, but knowing that you were my date, made me ecstatic about going. I was so nervous to dance with you. Nancy actually had to teach me how to dance,” he laughed, causing El giggling a little. “I wanted to impress you so badly.”

El could feel her own eyes beginning to water. All the answers that she had desperately wanted to hear, despite her own fears, were finally being given to her.

“After that dance, I was waiting for the perfect moment. I wanted to ask you to be my girlfriend. I wanted to go on more dates with you and to just be able to give you all the love that I had,” he frowned, shaking his head.

“W-What stopped you?” El asked hesitantly, her heart practically in her throat.

Mike sighed, raising their hands up slightly. “This. This stopped. You would barely look at me sometimes. When we got into high school, I thought that you had outgrown me. You weren’t holding my hand anymore and everytime I tried to kiss your cheek or something, you pulled away. I thought that you thought I was a total wasteoid or something.”

El’s heart shattered, the tears freely flowing now. If she hadn’t been so caught up in the drama of high school and so concerned about what other people thought, maybe her relationship would’ve panned out differently with Mike.

“That’s not the case. That’s not the case at *all* ,” El whimpered slightly. “If anything, I was falling more in love with you as the days passed. I wanted nothing more than to be with you. I was just scared about what people would think. I didn’t want to mess up everything with all the drama that always occurred. This is all my fault.”

El pulled her hand away from Mike’s, concealing her face by holding her head in her hands. She cried gently into her palms, shaking with hurt and anger at herself.

“No! No, El, this isn’t all your fault,” Mike said hurriedly, his hand

reaching to rub her leg gently, attempting to calm her down. “I was the real coward. I should’ve just asked you what you felt. I should’ve told you I liked you. It’s not just your fault. It was mine, too. I should’ve known from what had happened in our past that you still wanted to be with me. I was just an idiot kid.”

El kept crying, hearing Mike sniffling, too. All of the little pieces of their past were slowly coming together. A burning question rose in El’s mind as she slowly lifted her head and looked at the glossy brown eyes that met hers.

“Do you know how much it *destroyed* me to see you with Melanie?” El croaked, pulling her knees to her chest in order to hug herself. “I used to come home every day and cry. Max would try to help me stay positive, but nothing worked. It broke my heart seeing you two together everyday. I had to put on a stupid fake smile at school, but I still couldn’t bare being around you. That’s why Max and I started to pull ourselves away.”

Mike gasped, El answering some of the questions that always swarmed his head. El felt her heart ache as she told Mike the truth about the hell that he put her through. She felt as if she was 17 again, wishing that back then, she could’ve said all of this to 17 year old Mike.

“The only reason I was with her was to distract myself from you,” Mike admitted, his voice getting angry with himself. “I had stupidly convinced myself that you wanted nothing to do with me. I thought you hated me. I couldn’t stop thinking about you and when Melanie come along and she immediately seem interested, I just assumed she could distract me from my feelings for you. When you and Max started pulling away, I thought you two were just done with the nerdy shit that we all used to pull. I never realized it was because of me.”

Mike took a deep breath before continuing, “I know that on the outside, I was all smiles and kissing pictures and laughs, but on the inside? El, I was *heartbroken*. Everytime I kissed Melanie, I wished it was you. Every time I told her I loved her, I knew it was a lie. I just thought that what you had felt for me had gone away and that I wasn’t worthy of being with someone like you.”

El's head shot up from her knees, almost as if a wave of oxygen and clarity had hit her. "Michael Wheeler, there is no way that *I* deserve someone like you. I was such a bad friend and I have been trying to avoid you since Junior Year. I didn't want to get hurt again. I was willing to just settle with someone I had lukewarm feelings for just because I couldn't bare the thought of someone else having you. You are so worthy of me."

More tears streamed down their faces at their confessions, all of their emotions out on the table. El certainly wanted to talk to Mike, but she never thought it would be turning out as it was right now. She never realized the damage that *she* had done. Pinning the blame all on Mike all these years had felt right, but was so wrong in reality. They had worked together to hurt each other. Hopefully, now, they could work together to heal each other.

"You're worthy of me, El. There has never been a day that has gone by that I don't think about you. The only reason I have ever dated anyone else was in order to try and *forget* how much I care about you. In fact, when I finally got the courage to admit to myself that you're what I wanted, I immediately broke up with my college girlfriend. I made it a goal to reconnect with you this summer. I am still so in love with you, El. You're the only girl that's truly in my heart. I could never possibly be in love with someone else," Mike reached out and held El's face between his hands. They were warm, but trembling as he poured his heart out. "The other night when we almost kissed...I knew it was wrong. I knew you had a boyfriend, but I didn't care. I can't live like this anymore. All I want is you."

El reached her hands up in order to place hers over Mike's. She just wanted to be able to feel him herself, know that he was real and this wasn't some sort of dream.

"Michael Wheeler, I have been in love with you since that day you made me that Barbie dollhouse. That childish little kiss we had still tops every other kiss I have had to this day. I even named my freaking business because of you," El laughed slightly, her face finally perking into a small smile.

Mike gave her a confused look. "But, I thought you sa-"

“I lied,” El shook her head. “We had eaten sugar cookies that day, ones with blue sprinkles on top. After I had pecked you, there were sprinkles on your lips. I knew from that day that I would always love you. I’ve known since I was six, Mike.”

Mike began to smile too, almost as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. For both of them, this night seemed like a dream come true.

Suddenly, Mike’s face fell back into a frown as he recalled what El had said earlier.

“The other night. I left, I know. I had to get away for a couple of days to figure stuff out. I wanted to give you space for whatever was happening. I shouldn’t have left you. I’m so sorry,” Mike frowned. El shook her head, dismissing his self-deprecation.

“What happened with Carter?” he asked her softly. El inhaled sharply, the wounds of her most recent fling resurfacing.

“He broke up with me. He’s always known about my history with you. Most of the time when I was closed off from him, it was because my mind was thinking about you. He hated you for it. So, when he saw us the other night, he assumed that we were seeing each other behind his back. He didn’t hear me out for the truth, but he did accuse me of some pretty colorful things. But, it doesn’t matter. I was never in love with him. You were always in my head,” El explained softly. “And, about what he said when he walked in. I never really hated you, Mike. I just hated what happened. I just wanted to be with you. Carter was simply nice enough and I was willing to live an ordinary life with him. But, I should’ve known. It would’ve never been enough with you still living on this planet.”

Mike smiled, his fingers gently rubbing El’s cheeks. “I’ll gladly go to wherever he is and kick his ass for you.”

El smiled again finally at Mike’s comment. “Join the team. So does Max and my dad.”

Silence surrounded the pair again, but it wasn’t awkward or full of tension. Instead, it was full of love and longing. They sat in their embrace, staring into each other’s eyes and mulling over each other’s

words. All their anguish was slowly washing away with each confession. It was solidified now. It was if their promise of a new kind of something was back. They both *loved* each other. They always had. Perhaps they really could have a future together now.

After a few minutes, Mike bit his lip, staring into El's eyes. "You have no idea how badly I've wanted to kiss you all these years."

El gasped a little, blushing thankfully under Mike's hands.

"Me too," El whispered, lowering their hands away from her face. She shifted onto her knees, moving closer to him. Mike sat up too, only slightly taller than her.

Without hesitation, the pair leaned in like they had the other night, only this time, it was filled with much more hope and passion. El closed her eyes and suddenly, she understood why people described kissing as melting. She could feel herself practically melt together with Mike, their lips moving slowly and gently. She let go of his hands and wrapped her arms around his neck, letting warmth pool over her body as she *finally* got to kiss Michael Wheeler again. His hands wrapped around her waist as their long kisses continued. Neither of them wanted to stop for air, their desperation for the other finally coming to an end.

El combed her fingers through the hair on the nape of Mike's neck as they finally broke apart from one another. Their breathing was haggard and their hearts were beating identically.

"Even better than the first time," Mike whispered through labored breath, rubbing El's back. El smiled, her eyes welling with tears and happiness.

El pulled Mike in for a hug, realizing that this time, she would *never* have to let go. In combination with her new love-filled stupor and exhaustion, El pulled Mike down onto her bed. They pulled the covers to their shoulders and El cuddled up to Mike's chest. He wrapped his arms around her tightly as she listened to the fast beat of his heart. Everything was perfect. Everything was more than what they both could have ever dreamed for.

The pair fell asleep like that, legs tangled and hearts full of happiness. They slept soundly, their fears finally banished.

In fact, they slept so soundly, they didn't wake up when light flooded through El's window.

They slept through the coffee pot downstairs being brewed.

They didn't wake up until Jim was standing right above them.

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so this came out waaaaay longer than I anticipated, but I really think you all will like it!! Hooray, everything has finally been resolved! And, they finally kissed!!

There is only one more chapter of this story which is kind of like an Epilogue, you will see. Please let me know what you guys thought about this chapter!! I really want some feedback in the comments :)

Thank you for all your continued love and support. I was hoping this story would be interesting and I am really glad everyone is enjoying it! I can't wait for you guys to read the ending, so until next time! :)

~Veronica

6. Healed Hearts

Notes for the Chapter:

just a head's up: the italicized paragraphs all depict future events :)

The warm comfort El felt, thanks to Mike being pressed close to her during their sleep, came to an abrupt end as Jim grabbed Mike by the shoulders and pulled him out of bed.

“What the...” Mike said in confusion, rubbing his shoulders a little and looking around before realizing what was going on.

El shot upright and gasped. This was *not* the impression she wanted her dad to have of this new Mike! Especially, if he was somewhat of her boyfriend now!

“Wheeler, why the *hell* did I find you in my daughter’s bed this morning?” Jim asked through clenched teeth.

Mike scrambled up onto his feet, backing up into one of the corner’s of El’s room. On any other occasion, Mike was an inch or two taller than Jim. But, a combination of Jim’s death glare and Mike’s anxiety caused him to shrink in cowardice to a lower height.

Jim looked at El for an answer as well, the same look of petrification on his daughter’s face. He looked around and spotted the makeshift bridge, clenching his fists.

“How long have you been sneaking into El’s room?” Jim pointed to the bridge, staring Mike down. “Days? Weeks? Hell, since high school?”

“N-No, not at all, sir!” Mike finally stuttered an answer, coughing a little and trying to stand up straighter. “This is the f-first and only time!”

Jim shook his head and pointed to El’s door. “Out. Now.”

Mike originally made a mad dash for the bridge, clearly too mortified

to notice Jim's gesture. For a second time in the past five minutes, Jim grabbed Mike by the shoulders and turned him towards El's bedroom door.

Years later, Jim would tease the couple about this moment constantly. He said it was not only the moment he realized they had finally made up, but it was also the moment he realized they would be inseparable from then on out. Mentioning this particular memory at their wedding would cause much scolding from Mrs. Wheeler, but finally a laugh about it out of Jim.

Quickly, Mike turned around and looked at El. It was almost as if he was looking for some sort of strength in her eyes. He then turned back to Jim.

"I just wanted to say that we didn't do anything, but sleep. And, I mean it. Like literal sleeping? You know just two people not really touching while unconscious and having dreams...innocent dreams!" Mike rambled, trying to do anything he could to eradicate the morning's events.

"Mike," El groaned, shaking her head and biting her lip. Oh God, her dad was going to *kill* her.

"Out, Wheeler," Jim spoke sternly again, pointing to the door. Without another word, Mike sprinted out of the house. Still attempting to comprehend what the hell was going on, Jim turned to his daughter, the cold harshness set in his jaw.

"Dad, it was nothing! I swear, nothing like *that* happened," El tried to explain, the pure shock and horror of the situation wearing off. She needed to salvage her trust with her dad, but also, reassure him that Mike would never treat her like that.

"It doesn't matter, El! You don't just let a boy in your room when he knows you're hurting! It's the easiest way to get taken advantage of," Jim put his forehead in his hand, shaking his head. He had put up with El's shenanigans for years, but he would never get used to everything she pulled.

"Can you please just trust me? I knew what I was doing. We talked for awhile beforehand! It wasn't like I just saw him and was like 'Oh,

“Hey, Mike! Wanna come sleep with me? Shouldn’t you know me better?” El pulled herself out of bed in order to square off with her father. It didn’t matter that Jim had a solid half of a foot on her. El’s personality alone was enough to outmatch her dad.

“I do trust you. And, you’re an adult. You can make your own choices. All I’m saying, is that Mike isn’t allowed in your room when you’re not in the best of places mentally. If you do want him over, tell him to use the front door. At least I know he’s here,” Jim sighed in exasperation, trying to express to his daughter his concerns. He may not have known what the pair talked about last night, but it still didn’t excuse the fact that now El was all cosy with the boy she was so unsure about the afternoon before.

“Dad, I promise. No more sneaking him around. I promise you,” El agreed, extending her hand out for him to shake.

Jim sighed, shaking his daughter’s hand and following with a teasing remark about how he had never seen Wheeler look so petrified in his life. El laughed contently, knowing that even though this morning was rough with her dad and Mike, they would have the rest of their lives to laugh and love through it.

“And, you’re absolutely sure he’s going to be there?” Max asked El nervously, lip between her teeth. It had been the next day since the bedroom fiasco. During the proceeding night, where El and Mike talked until the early morning hours with their legs swinging off of their respective windowsills, Mike had mentioned that the rest of the party would be coming over the following day. He had extended the invitation to El who graciously accepted, only if Max could come as well, of course.

So now, Max sat at El’s desk, attempting to do something about her unruly red hair and asking a million and one questions. El had never seen Max so nervous before, but it was understandable. When Max pulled the selfless act of willingly leaving *her* long-time crush simply

to make El comfortable, she pushed away her feelings for Lucas Sinclair. However, now that they would be reuniting, in about ten minutes no less, Max felt beyond jittery.

“Yes, he will be there. Dustin and Will included. It’ll be like old times,” El smiled at herself in her mirror, swiping on some cherry chapstick. She hadn’t kissed Mike since the night they shared and it was almost as if the ache she felt for loving him was replaced with a desire to kiss him and hold him and be close to him at every second of every day. Her nerves were always ready for contact, so anxious to just *be* with the man of her dreams again.

Max nodded, smoothing back her hair with a headband. El placed a hand on Max’s shoulder, giving her a reassuring squeeze. It was time that Max got the happiness that El always felt she had taken away from her. Max constantly insisted that it was always sisters, biological or physical, over whatever boy drama was ensuing. El never failed to express how thankful she was for her best friend each time she made that point.

The girls made their way over to the Wheeler house, being greeted lovingly by Karen just as she had the last time she saw the pair. She was asking them about their summers and was explaining how eccastic she was that the kids, more like adults now, were all hanging out again.

“Well, they are outside girls. Let me know if you need anything,” Karen smiled, gesturing to the doors that lead outside.

El’s heart skipped happily, seeing Mike lounging on a chair next to Will as Dustin and Lucas appeared to be going on one of their comical bouts of sarcasm on the lawn. The girls were about to head outside when Karen asked El to stay back for a moment. Max sent El a giddy smile before heading outside. El could even hear a muffled “Henderson! That cap of yours probably has diseases by now!”

“I am so happy that you and Mike are on better terms now,” Karen smiled at El with adoration. The younger girl felt a blush rise onto her cheeks as a small smile spread onto her face.

“Me too. I have missed talking to him,” El admitted as she once again

glanced outside to where Mike was. He was talking to Max, but he had a look of excitement on his face. It was as if he couldn't contain the fact that in a few minutes, El would be with him.

"He's always cared so much about you, El. I'm glad that you two were able to work through what happened. I've always been so...protective of you. I've always wanted the best for you," Karen spoke happily, her eyes full of joy.

El's smile grew at the woman's words. She had always considered Karen to be her second mother, especially when her own passed away. She always knew that Karen was open to talking to her, even when her and Mike weren't on friendly terms. However, now that everything was cleared up, El was grateful that she had Karen back in her life as a permanent fixture.

When El is pregnant with her first child, she often sits in her mother-in-law's kitchen and speaks openly about her worries. She is scared she won't be a good mom or that she will not be able to do what's best for her baby. Karen, always the voice of solace and reason in El's life, consistently reassures her that there is nothing to worry about. Karen would tell her the truth: she will be a fantastic mother because she is already a fantastic woman. El's worries will assuage into hope and determination, ready to give her child the best life possible.

"I really appreciate that," El beamed at the woman. "Honestly, I think what's always been best for me is your son."

Karen giggled, almost like a child in a candy store, finally getting what they wanted. "Then, it's best you go out and see him."

El laughed back, the two women embracing each other before El made her way to the backyard. Before she even looked at Mike, her eyes caught the nervous flirtation already sparking between Max and Lucas. *Finally!*

"Hopper!" Dustin yelled gleefully, running full speed to El and wrapping her in a hug. The sheer excitement radiated between the two of them as El hugged him back tightly.

"I've missed you," El laughed when they pulled apart.

“Not as much as me! C’mon, everyone wants to see you,” he smiled.

Dustin pulled El’s arm towards the center of the backyard where she reconnected with Lucas next, a happy hug exchanged between the pair. El had already seen Will several times this summer, but this didn’t stop her from hugging him tightly. Her first reconnection with Will had been the catalyst to prompt her into delving more into her feelings for Mike and her lack there of for Carter. Will had helped her realize who she truly belonged with.

El whispered a “thank you” into Will’s ear before pulling away from him. Recognition sparked on his face, before he nodded and smiled.

El took a deep breath, bracing herself as she turned to Mike. She purposely saved him for last, knowing she would be unable to stop looking at him or holding his hand. She craved to be with him like never before.

The tension between them could only be described as *electric*. It was as if they were both waiting for this moment even though they had just talked the previous night, just out of arm’s reach from each other. As if an invisible force was linked between the two of them, the pair immediately hugged tightly. El leaned up on her toes and didn’t hesitate as she kissed Mike lovingly.

“Hey! Mike agreed to no PDA,” Lucas chuckled after only a few seconds, causing Max to burst out laughing.

“We support you two, but we don’t need to see all that lovey dovey shit,” Dustin moaned, covering his eyes and acting as though he was offended.

“Shut up, will you?” Will rolled his eyes, a smile on his face for his two childhood best friends.

Through all of this chatter and sarcastic remarks, El and Mike never broke apart. They were determined to make up for lost time. However, they would shortly realize that they had all the time in the world to be together.

Shortly afterwards, the party sat around the Wheeler’s patio table,

eating lunch and laughing hard. El had felt nostalgic, sitting next to Mike and secretly holding his hand under the table. Max and Dustin argued over movies and books while Lucas often jumped in to her defense. Will played the mediator, shutting down any threatening, yet boneless remarks that the friends normally made with one another. It felt like it had in middle school, maybe even like it was at the start of high school. The party didn't change no matter how much time they had spent apart from one another. It was as if it didn't matter what came between them or why they were distanced for so long. They would always be themselves and act as though no time had passed when they were together.

For the rest of their lives, it would not matter if Dustin and his wife lived in Michigan with his family or that Will and his wife owned an art gallery in New York. It wouldn't be a problem that Max and Lucas lived in California or that Mike and El decided to reside in Hawkins after all. When the party came together during holidays or on impromptu visits, they would be beyond eccentric and would laugh like they had just seen each other yesterday versus the reality of it being months. The bond between the six friends was forever unbreakable.

This unique quality would even be passed onto their children. Dustin would often refer to their children, who would play new techno games together and constantly ask their parents to play them sci-fi movies, as the mini-party. It would be as if their kids inherited the bond that their parents had always felt for each other. Distance and time didn't matter as long as they knew they had each other in their lives through phone calls and video chats and eventual in-person meet ups. The party would always be the party, no matter the circumstance.

“You guys are all invited to the store opening. I’ll even bribe you with free cake if you’d like,” El smiled. Will had told her he would be finishing his paintings for her this week which prompted Lucas to ask more about the business. In just two weeks, Blue Sprinkles would be opening for all of Hawkins to see and shop at. El was beyond excited for the ribbon-cutting ceremony she was planning, but the thought of having her friends with her, thrilled her even more.

“I wouldn’t need the cake in order to come, but I’ll take it anyways,” Dustin nodded triumphantly.

“Neither would I, but count me *extra* in if you’ll make that pumpkin thing you bake so well,” Lucas said excitedly.

“Aw, stalker,” Max broke out her old nickname for her crush, “you don’t want to come just to see me?”

Max’s statement caused Lucas to turn dark red and let out a little defeated “maybe.” El giggled slightly, watching the nervous flirting going back and forth. It was always prominent when they were younger, but absence truly had made Lucas and Max’s hearts grow fonder for each other.

Mike coughed a little, squeezing El’s hand under the table gently. “I guess I should come. It seems like the nice thing to do.”

El rolled her eyes, playfully hitting Mike’s arm with her free hand. She giggled, watching amusement circle in Mike’s dark eyes. Her heart sputtered, all of her emotions feeling so beyond what she could have ever dreamed for.

El had decided that all of the pain was worth it. She would go through high school and feeling hopeless a thousand times over if it meant the look on Mike’s face never left and she was promised to be with him forever.

Just as they had promised to her weeks prior, the party was the first to arrive at Blue Sprinkles on the morning of the launch. Mike had gone to the store early with El, helping her set up the blue ribbon on the front door and displaying all the treats she had been making in the new glass cases. In fact, there was no time in the past few weeks that Mike wasn’t with El. They both feared the looming separation that was approaching, taking Mike back to college in a few days. El wasn’t fearful though. She knew their love for each other was strong enough to withstand anything.

The next few hours were a blur for El. The local newspaper press and television station came in addition to most of Hawkins. Jim was jubilant, standing next to his daughter and expressing how proud he

was of her. She was really going after her dreams. He hadn't been easy on El when she wanted to begin a business fresh out of high school. But, her determination and passion had all paid off.

The reporters all gathered around El, interviewing her about her life and her hopes for her business. She felt a little starstruck for all the recognition her business was getting. She dreamed of making it big, but this felt like one of the more surreal moments of her success. Surrounded by her friends, family, and her now totally *official* boyfriend, she cut the blue ribbon to Blue Sprinkles and was met with cheers and applause. It was a day that El would never forget.

After several hours of open business, El getting requests for more orders than ever and her entire baked stock getting bought out by the end of it all, El flipped the "Deliciousness waits inside!" sign to the back which read "Unfortunately, deliciousness will have to wait until tomorrow!"

The party had all stayed for a while, aiding El with orders and clean up and especially, giving rather bogus shoutouts on the news. Now, it was just her and Mike, splitting the last of cake that she purposely saved for this moment. El had enjoyed beginning her day with Michael Wheeler and she was beyond thrilled to be ending it with him as well. He was her unadulterated, unending happiness now, a prospect she had always dreamed about.

The couple sat on the counter that faced the window which showcased Hawkins, legs swinging as they stupidly battled each other's forks for the last bite of cake.

"I think I should get it," Mike's fork clanged with El's. "After all, I did help make the icing for it."

El threw her head back in laughter. "Okay, that may be true. I do appreciate your help. But, did you just launch your storefront today? I don't think so."

"Big deal, Eleven," Mike snagged El's fork out of her hand, causing her to pout and shake her head.

"I don't know what I'm more mad about. The fact that you took my

fork, or that you called me that! We both agreed that El was a better nickname...Thirteen," El giggled, loving the mock hurt face Mike put on. El couldn't even remember the last time she called him that.

When they were six years old, they wanted to create secret nicknames for each other in order to create a secret language. After all, how else were young best friends supposed to communicate with each other? After no luck with their real names, "Jane" having no shorter version and "Mike" being too ordinary, they decided on calling each other by their house numbers. Jane, or Eleven, had lived on 11 Maple Street while Mike, or Thirteen, lived on 13 Maple Street. While his nickname never stuck, Eleven had. El had developed in middle school, a nickname for her nickname. El never felt that Jane suited her, but for some reason, El did.

El sighed, putting on a fake pout as she watched Mike use the fork to pick up the last bite of her celebration cake. To her surprise, he turned it her way.

"I guess, you win this round," Mike cracked a smile again, feeding El the last bite.

This particular memory would flood through El's mind when her and Mike are married a few years later. Instead of Mike nicely feeding her, however, he smashes the entire cake slice in her face, causing the entire reception to erupt in laughter.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Mrs. Wheeler. My hand slipped," Mike would laugh loudly, looking at the teasing scowl on El's face as she cleared the icing from her eyes. Her hand would reach for the pre-cut slice on the table.

"As long as it didn't get on my dress, Mr. Wheeler," El would smirk, before smashing her slice in Mike's face. She wouldn't be able to help, but giggle in glee at the smile that would erupt on Mike's face before they kiss, tasting the cake on each other's lips.

Mike wrapped his arm around El's shoulders, both of them watching as the sun set outside on Hawkins. They had spent a lot of time in the storefront leading up to the opening. Each night, they would sit and watch the sunset. Each time felt just as magical as it did the night they danced like two middle schoolers again.

El heard Mike laugh a little under his breath and she turned her head to look up at him. He was already looking at her and El lost the ability to breathe when she took in the look on his face. He was always bursting with love when it came to her.

“What’s so funny?” El turned herself a little, resting the side of her head on Mike’s shoulder so she could still see his face.

Mike looked down at her, smiling while biting his lip. “I was just thinking about how much 17 year old me would scream if he saw what I was doing right now.”

“Well, I know 17 year old me would be *very* happy,” El smiled, nuzzling her head in Mike’s neck, his arms enveloping her in security and warmth. He rested his chin on her head before whispering,

“I am so in love with you, El Hopper.”

El didn’t think the effect those few words had on her would ever change. If anything, the gravity and weight behind them would only increase. She held onto his arms, feeling herself fall even more.

“I am so in love with you, Michael Wheeler.”

The night before Mike was to leave for MIT again had been purposely blocked out to be a Mike and El night only. They had said goodbye to their friends that afternoon with a promise to have their own party version of Thanksgiving at Dustin’s house in a few months. Now, Mike and El sat in the car on the way back to Mike’s house, hands held tightly on the center console.

Although they both were already planning weekends to visit and even had one or two plane tickets booked, the grave reality of the situation was sinking in. They had spent the whole summer in loops and trepidation and hopefulness only to have to be separated again. It was going to be hard not to hold each other or kiss each other. Of course, the couple was beyond prepared to work through it. They had waited practically their whole lives to be together. The hours

between them could never break that.

El had already informed her dad that she would not be returning home that night, but rather to the home next door. Jim smiled, telling his daughter to have fun, just not too much, of course.

“What do you have planned for tonight?” El asked softly, watching as Hawkins flew by past them. Mike’s thumb was gently rubbing her hand, an act she found endearing and comforting.

“We could watch some movies or something,” he shrugged as he drove. “I just want to spend every second with you.”

El smiled, lifting their hands and kissing his knuckles. Michael Wheeler would never cease to be the sweetest boy she had ever met.

When they arrived at Mike’s house, a little past ten o’clock, they snuck down into the basement. His mom was already upstairs while his dad was passed out in the living room. Nancy had spent the night at Jonathan, her long-term boyfriend’s, house while Holly was having a sleepover at her friend’s house. Essentially, Mike and El were alone for the night.

“I don’t remember the last ti-” El started to reminisce about their times in the basement, but she stopped dead in her tracks. Mike had walked onto the floor, but she was stuck on the steps. Her eyes were locked at what lay a little bit to the right. El couldn’t believe Mike had remembered about that.

When El’s mom passed away when they were seven, she was naturally sullen and refused to talk to anyone. For the first few days, she stayed in bed and slept away the memories of the car accident report and the hospital and the funeral. Her dad had tried to coax her out of bed, but she wouldn’t budge. El, although very close to her dad, was a Mama’s girl. They did everything together, from baking to shopping to singing Disney songs late into the night. Her mom was her female best friend and ultimate caregiver wrapped into one. Losing her mom had been the hardest thing El ever had to go through.

Eventually, when she did pull herself out of her bedroom, she became

sick with the thought of living in the same rooms that she once walked with her mom in. Upon entering the kitchen to eat, El even threw up. She had always associated the kitchen with her mom and baking, but that was no longer a possibility. She couldn't bare how odd it was not to have her mom home, especially considering she knew that she wouldn't be coming back.

Wanting to help the girl her son was so fond of, Karen suggested to Jim that El stay at their house for a few days. After all, it was far away enough from home that El wouldn't get sick, but close enough that Jim could still keep an eye on her.

For the next two weeks, El lived at the Wheeler residence and tried to work through the death of her mom. Michael Wheeler was never not by her side. He would do anything he could to make her as happy as she could be and comfortable. It was in those two weeks that El's feelings for her best friend were strengthened.

On the first night, the pair were downstairs and Mike suggested they watched a movie. However, to make things more interesting, the pair set up a blanket fort under the large table the Wheelers had downstairs. It was big enough for both of them, some pillows, and blankets to rest comfortably while watching movies.

The little blanket fort had become El's refuge while she stayed with Mike. Most of their days were spent cuddling under the blankets and watching whatever movie El had picked out while she softly spoke about her mom. In between the healthier meals that Karen would bring them, Mike would feed El Eggos and sugar cookies, trying to see if her favorite foods would make her just a little bit happy. Mike had immediately become her rock through her grieving process and even now, she looked back on those two weeks and thanked a higher power for giving her such a strong support system.

Even after the two weeks were over, Mike never took the fort down. Over the years, even as they entered middle school, whenever El was feeling down, she would find herself in the blanket fort. Mike was always there, sat next to her with sugar cookies and a listening heart. Their little safe haven was a place of sacred feelings, shoulders to cry on, and endless snuggles. It was something El desperately missed in high school.

El had always assumed that Mike had taken the fort down when he started dating Melanie. El figured she would have asked about it and then, forced her then boyfriend to take it down. After all, what girlfriend *would* let their boyfriend cuddle with a girl he had feelings for? Additionally, Mike and El weren't even on speaking terms anymore. It's not like there would be any use for it anymore.

However, as El stared at the blanket fort from the steps, everything looked the same since the last time she saw it in ninth grade. There were the same pillows and blankets and even the same string lights on the table that El had eventually hung up.

"I never took it down," Mike spoke softly, breaking El from her fascination. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked at her. "I always left it up, no matter the protests from girlfriends. It was kind of my way of hoping one day, you would come back to me."

Tears welled up in El's eyes at Mike's confession. The blanket fort was not only sentimental for the times they shared in there, but because of how it initially came to be. That fort wasn't just about Michael Wheeler. It was also about El's mom. However, the fact that Mike just stated that the fort was almost like a good luck talisman, makes El feel like she's walking on clouds. He really *has* always hoped for them to be together.

Before El could speak, Mike opened up again. "You know, sometimes I just sit in there by myself. Even when I was with Melanie, I would come home from a date with her and I would just come down here and try to feel any semblance of love for her. When I came back this summer, I actually slept in there the first night as pathetic as that sounds. I was hoping it would bring me luck."

El's feet moved faster than her mouth does as she rushed over to Mike and hugged him tightly. She wrapped her arms around his neck and whimpered in his shoulder slightly. It was beautiful what he had done. He was beautiful. El couldn't believe that after all that went on, he still hoped for her.

When James Wheeler is seven years old and his sister, Mia, is five, their dad would build them their first blanket fort in the living room. While El is out kicking dough as a now nationally known baker, Mike would

sometimes be able to work for his mechanical engineering company from home. Even though Mike is supposed to be working, he often would find himself more enthused about playing with his kids. His children would want to watch a movie one day, but would whine that the couch was just all too boring. Therefore, Dad would have to step in, with the help of the kids of course, to use the kitchen table chairs and the duvets from their beds to make a fort.

Later, when El would come home, she would find her husband asleep in the middle of the blanket fort with his head on a princess pillow and one child wrapped in each arm, both still avidly watching cartoons. Watching from afar before anyone would notice, El feels herself become nostalgic again and a few tears escape. All the memories of their first fort would come back: her mom, middle school, the summer they started dating, their first real night together, when Mike proposed to her. As stupid as the concept of a pillow fort may seem, they would always be Mike and El's happy place.

Mia's head would perk up as she sprints to her mom. El would smile widely and pick up her little girl. Her mother-in-law had been right about El. She is a fantastic mother.

"Mama! Look what daddy built us!" Mia would smile excitedly as El kissed her cheek.

"It looks rather cosy, sweetheart. Can I come join you?" El would ask and Mia would nod excitedly. Her daughter would rush El over to the fort where Mike had now woken up and James attacked his mother in a hug.

El eventually would be able to lay down next to Mike, both their heads now on the princess pillow. Mia would cuddle up to El while James was on Mike's side. While their kids would content themselves with cartoons, El would turn to Mike and place a loving kiss on her husband's lips.

"Even better than the first one," El would whisper, mirroring the words Mike had said during their first kiss that one summer so many years ago.

Mike peppered kisses all over El's face as he carried her over to the blanket fort. It was a little hard for both of them to fit now, but when Mike laid down, El could easily crawl onto his chest.

“How is it that I seem to fall more in love with you with every second that passes?” El whispered, placing her hand over Mike’s heart. She could feel him let out a bit of chuckle.

“Trust me, the feeling is mutual,” Mike kissed the top of her head. A beat passed and then, “I have a present for you.”

El sat up slightly, hands pressed on the floor on either side of Mike’s head as she lay on top of him.

“What do you mean? I thought we said the plane tickets were our presents,” El frowned, not wanting Mike to go out of his way for her. The little things were what made her happy. She didn’t need big gestures.

“I’ve actually been working on it since the summer started. I was planning on giving it to you if you rejected me as a...peace offering,” Mike cringed slightly at his initial plans. “It is much more meaningful now that we are together.”

He shifted a little bit underneath her to pull out a box from his back pocket. El bit her lip as she placed the box on his chest and pulled the lid off. Inside, resting on some white cotton, was a silver-chain locket. The pendant itself was a heart that was designed with swirls and loops. One of the bent pieces melded together in a way that read “E” and “M” in cursive, the initials of the couple.

“Mike, it’s so beautiful!” El gasped, picking the locket out of the box.

Mike was smiling, but it was a shaky grin, nervous almost. “There’s actually more to it. See the little latch on the side? You can open it.”

El looked for the latch and pressed it back. As soon as the locket was open, soft music filled the space between the pair. On the inside, there were two pictures. The left panel was a picture of the two of them when they were six years old, playing in the backyard during the summer. The right panel was of a picture they had taken together the night of the storefront opening, after all the commotion and with the sun’s orange glow hitting their faces. As El smiled brightly at the pictures, she realized what the song was. It was a piano version of “Every Breath You Take,” the chorus playing on a loop.

“H-How?” El looked at Mike through teary eyes. So *this* is what he was always up late tinkering with.

“Let’s just say I pulled some engineering magic. It is a little too complicated for even me to comprehend,” he smiled, biting his lip. “Do you like it?”

“Like? Michael Wheeler, I love it. Just as much as I love you,” El smiled, leaning forward and pressing a tender kiss on Mike’s lips. He ran his fingers through her curls and hummed appreciatively against her lips.

They eventually shifted again so Mike could clasp the necklace around El’s neck.

“This,” Mike whispered as he let the necklace fall back onto El’s chest, “is so you always have a little piece of me. Even while I’m gone.”

El turned around, looking at the love of her life. “It is never coming off then.”

El never broke her promise. The only time she did take off the necklace was when it was in danger of getting wet due to the music box inside. Otherwise, in every photo taken of El after that day, the silver chained pendant could always be spotted around her neck.

As they adjusted to their previous position, El resting on Mike’s chest with his arms wrapped around her, the pair began to talk about everything and anything. They discussed their separation, the new and the old. They talked about their future, unbeknownst to them yet how full of love it would be. They talked about their sour, yet beautiful history and their more than welcome times to come. After talking avidly about the first day they met, Mike chuckled a little.

“You know, of all the girls to live next door, I’m sure glad it was you,” he whispered.

“I don’t think houses have to do with it, Mike,” El responded softly. “I think it doesn’t matter where we are or in whatever lifetime we are in. I think we will always be able to find and love each other.”

“Oh, El Hopper,” Mike sighed happily, kissing her forehead. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

Without another word from the pair, they fell asleep like that, limbs entangled and hearts full of happiness and love. To El, it didn’t matter that he would be leaving tomorrow or that the summer had turned out completely different in the most magnificent way than she had originally anticipated.

All that mattered was that Michael Wheeler was finally where he belonged: in her arms.

Notes for the Chapter:

WOAH, I'M NOT CRYING, YOU ARE. But, for real, I am crying. I have spent literally all day writing and perfecting this final chapter and I am super happy with how it turned out. I hope I was able to nicely blend the present and the future of El and Mike.

Please please please let me know what you thought about the final chapter!!! I am so excited to hear about everyone's reactions and thoughts, so please leave me some comments :)

I cannot begin to thank everyone enough for their love and support for this story. I went back and forth all summer with ideas for an AU and I am so happy that this is the one I decided on. It even turned out to be longer and more in depth than I anticipated because of all of you!! Everyone has been so amazing and supportive and loving about this story and my writing and it literally makes me so happy that this AU brought so many smiles to my fellow Mileven shippers. I love each and every one of you SO much.

A few people have been asking, so I will mention it a little bit. I am not sure when my next AU will be out, but I am in the process of writing a new story! As a little bit of a hint, it will be angsty and full of love, but it is a lot darker than this story. Other hint, it is

loosely based off of the movie/book "Beautiful Creatures." The title isn't finalized yet, but I most likely will be calling it "Broken Specks," so if you are interested, be on the look out for it! :) I am not sure when I will be posting it, so please either subscribe to my ao3 user or follow my tumblr, @mikeyandellie, for updates. :)

Well, I can't believe my angsty, summer Mileven AU is over. I can't thank you guys enough for everything. I am so happy that "Blue Sprinkles" was well loved by many. Feel free to message me on tumblr if you guys want!! I really love talking to everyone :)

Until my next AU, have a great rest of summer and I'll see you soon! :)

~Veronica

Author's Note:

Hello everyone!! I am super pumped for this new AU! After trying to figure out what I could possibly write, I decided on this cute, slightly angsty summer story for El and Mike.

Let me know what you guys think about the story please!! Comments make me smile :)

Be sure to follow my new tumblr @mikeyandellie too! Well, I hope you enjoyed the first chapter and I will update you guys soon!

~Veronica